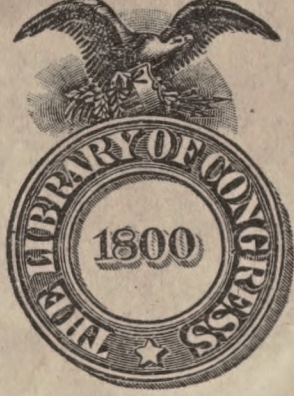


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THE PHANTOM CITY.

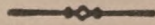
THE PHANTOM CITY.

A Volcanic Romance.

BY

WILLIAM WESTALL,

AUTHOR OF "RALPH NORBRECK'S TRUST," "RED RYVINGTON,"
"TWO PINCHES OF SNUFF," ETC.



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To

FREDERICK HENRY FAVIELL,

IN TOKEN OF THEIR FRIENDSHIP AND OF THE
AUTHOR'S ESTEEM,

This Book is inscribed.

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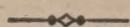


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THE PHANTOM CITY.

A Volcanic Romance.



CHAPTER I.

SEÑOR DON DOMINGO.

ON a certain very warm day in November, 186—, the Royal Mail steamer, *Guadalquivir*, whose surgeon I happened at the time to be, was lying off St. Peter's Island (of the Virgin group). We had arrived a few hours previously from England, and most of our cargo, and the majority of our passengers, had already been transferred to the smaller steamers bound for the Gulf, the Windward and Leeward Islands, the Spanish Main, and elsewhere.

A surgeon's life in these latitudes is generally rather an idle one—except when Yellow Jack pays you a visit, and then the chances are that if you escape him you die of overwork and anxiety—and, having nothing particular to do, I was sauntering about the quarter-deck, smoking a fragrant Havana, and talking with the mail agent and some of the passengers who were going to Jamaica, the *Guadalquivir's* ultimate destination, when

Herbert, the second officer, came aft, touched me on the shoulder, and drew me aside.

"You are wanted on board the *Tobasco*, Carlyon," he said.

"What for?"

"To see a sick passenger."

"A sick passenger! Nothing serious, I hope—not——" I said, with a look which he well understood.

"No, not Yellow Jack this time, thank God. We had enough of that on the last homeward trip. Nothing very particular, I fancy; only Handsome Tommy would like you to see the man—a Spaniard of some consequence, I believe—before he weighs anchor."

"I will go at once, then."

"Oh, there is no hurry. The *Tobasco* will not be ready to weigh for an hour or more. There is a boat alongside there—on the starboard quarter."

After finishing my cigar, and hearing the conclusion of the mail agent's story—he was a capital story-teller, poor fellow—I stepped into my cabin, put my instrument case into my pocket, and, waving my hand to my friends on the quarter-deck, got down into the boat. I little thought that I had seen them for the last time, and that I should never again set foot on the stately *Guadalquivir*.

Handsome Tommy, otherwise Thomas Tobias, was the *Tobasco's* skipper, a fine-looking fellow, with a tawny beard, immense vitality, and great bodily strength.

I found him on deck, under a white umbrella, watching the stowing of his cargo.

"Who and where is the sick man?" I asked.

"Either a Spaniard or a Greaser (Mexican), I am not sure which. Anyhow, they call him Señor Don Domingo. It was so confoundedly close in his bunk that I made the steward sling him a hammock near the after coaling port, where you will find him. I really believe it is cooler there than on deck."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Tobias. You did quite right. Nothing like plenty of air for the sick, and the sound too, for that matter."

I was turning away to seek my patient, when the skipper observed, in the quiet way which was natural to him, that he thought there was likely to be a change of weather.

"And quite time, too," I said, mopping the perspiration from my face, "it is almost too hot to breathe. But I see no signs of a change. The sky is clear, and the sea as calm as a mill-pond."

"I think if you look hard towards the sou'-west there, you will see something (handing me his glass)."

"I see nothing but a small cloud, about the size of a man's hand," I said, after looking for several minutes as hard as I could in the direction indicated.

"It will be bigger before it is less," answered Tommy, quietly. "The glass is beginning to fall, too. I wish I was out of this. If I don't get away before dark I shall lie here until morning."

Here the first officer came to ask some question about the cargo, and I went below to look after my patient, hoping that Handsome Tommy would be right in his forecast; for even a gale of wind would be preferable to that stifling intolerable heat—and a good deal more wholesome.

As I knew Spanish pretty well, I spoke to Señor Don Domingo in his own language. He was a meagre, middle-aged man, with a saffron-coloured, leathery skin, deep black eyes, a rather undershot lower lip, and heavy jaws. Albeit his temperament seemed in no way strumous, there were signs about his neck which showed that he had some time or other suffered either from scurvy or blood-poisoning. His present complaint, however, was apparently low fever, of a form common in the West Indies, and easily cured if taken in time. After feeling his pulse and testing his temperature, I sent the steward for the captain's medicine chest, gave Señor Domingo a cooling draught, and prepared him a mixture of which quinine was the principal ingredient.

“You are treating me for fever, Señor Doctor,” he said, after he had taken the draught.

“Certainly! It is fever you are suffering from—fever and the terrible heat. But this draught and the medicine I shall ask you to take later on will, I hope, set you to rights. I admit, though, that a good rattling sea breeze would probably do you more good than either. I am sorry, both for your sake and my own, that I cannot command one.”

“You are very kind. The fever is nothing ; it will readily yield to your skill, I am sure. But I have something here” (laying his left hand on the deltoid muscle of his right shoulder)—“I have something here that neither sea breeze nor medicine can cure. It has troubled me two years, and I fear will trouble me as long as I live.”

“What is it?”

“An old wound.”

“An old wound ! Old wounds are sometimes rather intractable, I know, but not always incurable. Would you mind letting me see it?”

“On the contrary, I should like you to see it very much,” and Señor Domingo, without more ado, bared his shoulder. He was terribly thin, poor fellow.

“An old wound !” I repeated. “Why, it looks as if it were only a few days old.”

“It is two years since I got it, though.”

I had never seen such a wound. It was not wide ; it did not seem to be deep, and it had evidently been produced by a sharp instrument. But the skin was as much discoloured as if it had been made by a burnt stick. There were marks of old abscesses, too, and a new one was forming close to the cicatrix, which bore every appearance of having only recently healed.”

“It breaks out after healing, I suppose?”

“Continually ; and those abscesses—I am hardly ever free from them. They make my life miserable, and sometimes reduce me to a state of great weakness.

I have been to doctor after doctor, but none of them seem able to do me any good."

"Very strange," I said, continuing to examine the wound, which presented some very peculiar symptoms in addition to those I have mentioned. "How did you get this hurt, may I ask?"

"From a poisoned arrow."

"A poisoned arrow! That accounts for it all; I never saw a wound from a poisoned arrow before. And two years ago, you say?" I felt curious to know what my patient had been doing to get himself shot with such a missile.

"Yes, I got it two years ago, and the wonder is that I survived to tell the tale," he answered, gloomily. "But do you think you can cure me? I fear it is almost past hoping for—still, you know, one does not like to abandon hope."

A difficult question to answer, my experience of the effects of poisoned arrows being decidedly limited; and, judging from the appearance of the shoulder, I could not honestly say that there was much likelihood of a speedy cure. Under the continuous heat of the tropics, the cellular tissue, becoming relaxed, loses much of its contractile power, and the defective lymphatic circulation thence resulting makes the healing of wounds and bruises sometimes very difficult. The nervous system, moreover, gets singularly irritable; the slightest hurts are often very painful, with a tendency to tetanus, which, when once it sets in, is absolutely beyond

control. In the present instance, moreover, there were signs of blood-poisoning, and my prognosis of the case was far from favourable. But it is never wise to dishearten a patient, and I did all I could to encourage the unfortunate Spaniard.

"Oh, you must not despair," I said, cheerily. "*Nil desperandum*, you know; and I do not regard your case as at all hopeless. The doctors you have consulted are Spanish doctors, I suppose?"

"Spanish and Creole."

"The same thing. And I dare say they have given you a lot of physic?"

"Bucketsful; I might almost say oceans. I have been doctoring for two years; and to tell the truth, Señor Doctor, I am on my way now to St. Jago de Cuba to consult a celebrated physician there, who is said to be able to cure anything."

"No doctor can do that, Señor Don Domingo. The man who says he can is a charlatan; and in my opinion, no amount of physic, no mere medical treatment, will do you good—rather harm, indeed. Yet, there is a way——"

"I thank Heaven and St. Dominic to hear you say so, Señor Doctor. Do me the favour to point out the way to health, and I will follow it. You English physicians are so surpassingly clever. The way, Señor Doctor, the way!"

"If you want to get better," I answered, bowing in acknowledgment of the compliment: "if you want to

get better, you must leave this part of the world at once for a more temperate climate. Go, if possible, to some Swiss or Tyrolese mountain resort, seven or eight thousand feet above sea-level, where the air is absolutely pure, and the rapid evaporation causes quick renewal of the tissues. Take, at the same time, a course of sulphur baths and hydropathic treatment, and in six months you will be another man."

"You think that would cure me?"

"I do."

"By the powers, I'll go then! A thousand thanks for your advice, Doctor Carlyon. "You have given me new hope," exclaimed the Señor Don, in a decided Irish accent.

To say that my breath was taken away would be an inadequate description of my feelings. If a mermaid had jumped through the port; if a shark had walked down the after-hatchway; if Handsome Tommy had appeared before us and danced a hornpipe, I could hardly have been more surprised.

"Have I actually been lavishing my best Castilian all this time on a fellow-countryman?" I asked, with some warmth; for though I knew Spanish fairly, English was a good deal easier.

"I don't know about the fellow-countryman; but I am Irish, if that is what you mean?" said Domingo, dryly.

"Fellow-subject, then, if you like that better. But as my mother was Irish, I cannot consider myself more than half English."

“So much the better. Let us be friends, countrymen, and lovers then. For your advice sounds sensible, and if the treatment you recommend restores me to health, you will have rendered me a great service. I suppose you are surprised at finding that I am——”

“Not a Señor Don? Rather.”

“You looked so. Would you like to know how I became a Señor Don, as you call it?”

“And came by that poisoned-arrow wound on your shoulder? Very much indeed.”

“Well, I will tell you. Light a cigar, sit down on that Southampton chair, and listen.”

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE STORY.

“I AM not going to tell you the story of my life *in extenso*”—said Señor Domingo, settling himself in his hammock, “it would take too much time, and you’ll be after going back to the *Guadalquivir* presently—only the main incidents. Well, as you know already, I was born an Irishman, and my people, who, I must tell you, did not occupy a very exalted position in the world, albeit they were in tolerably easy circumstances, destined me, from an early age, for the priesthood. Domingo is merely the Hispaniolised version of my family name, Dominick. My name in religion was Father Polycarp. After getting my schooling, and spending two or three years at college, I went to Spain, and completed my clerical education at Salamanca. It was my own wish. I wanted to travel, and I wanted, above all, to see Spain, a country which had always possessed a great attraction for me—I think through reading “Don Quixote” and “Gil Blas.”

“Some time after being ordained, I found favour with the archbishop, and was appointed to a very good post in the cathedral. But I was never content to remain long in the same place, and when a chance was

offered me of going to Costa Rica, I embraced it eagerly. I was always after exploring foreign countries; and if I had not gone into the Church, I dare say I might have become a great traveller."

"We seem to have similar tastes," I observed, "I am rather a rolling stone myself, and like nothing so well as knocking about the world and seeing out-of-the-way places. That was my principal reason for becoming a surgeon. There are sick people everywhere, and a doctor, like a sailor, can travel and get his living at the same time, and he is so far superior to a sailor, that he can get along either afloat or ashore. I have done a pretty big mileage already. Besides several voyages across the North and South Atlantic, I have gone with a ship-load of emigrants from London to New Zealand, and a cargo of coolies from Calcutta to Guiana. But I am interrupting you. Pray continue."

"You are a fortunate man. I wish I had gone in for medicine, for to tell the truth—but I am anticipating.

"Well, I went to Costa Rica, and after staying a while there, got myself transferred to Merida, in Yucatan. I liked Merida much. True, it is very hot; yet it suffers neither from yellow fever, hurricanes, nor earthquakes, which, for a Central American city, is something wonderful. It is a quaint place, too, contains buildings actually 300 years old, and the people are interesting—many of them really charming—and my position brought me in contact with some of the best people in the state. But what interested me most were

the ruined cities of the wilderness. Within a hundred miles of Merida are the magnificent ruins of Mayapan—Aké, Kabah, Laban, and many more; above all Uxmal, which is only sixty miles from Merida. I went there many times, and gazed with wonder, almost awe, on those superb relics of a lost civilisation, and was continually asking myself and inquiring of others, whence had come and whither gone the mysterious people by whom it was created. Were they Toltecs, or Aztecs?

“Nobody could tell me, and the books I consulted did not throw much light on the subject. But there was a legend in which, though the educated did not place much faith, the Mayan people (Indians of the locality) firmly believed. The legend runs, that in an unexplored part of the country—the vast region lying between Chiapas, Tobasco, Yucatan, and Guatemala, a region never trod by the white man’s foot—there is a great aboriginal city, with white walls, grand temples, and gorgeous buildings, in the same style of architecture as the ruins of Uxmal and Palenque, and inhabited by the same race as that which once held sway over the greater part of Central America, centuries before Columbus discovered the Western Continent. Several attempts were said to have been made to reach this hidden city, but all had failed. According to one account three young men actually got there, but, falling into the hands of the Indians, one was sacrificed on the high altar of the Temple of the Sun, and the other two were put to death with every refinement of cruelty.

“This story, however, must needs be purely apocryphal. For, if all three were killed, who was there left to tell the tale? The fact, I suppose, is, that three men once started on some such expedition, and never came back. Still another account had it that the Phantom City, as the Indians call it, had been seen, and not very long before, by the *cura* of a place in the South, from the top of a high mountain, that he had actually beheld its great walls, and mighty temples, glistening like silver in the sun, and reflected in the shining waters of the vast lake by which it is surrounded. Neither did I much believe this story, but I felt very curious to see that *cura*.”

“But why,” I asked, “should there be any difficulty in testing the truth of this legend and these stories? Guatemala and Yucatan are not extensive countries. They are not like Africa and Australia, and I never heard of there being any impassable deserts in Central America.”

“True, and Central America is a long way from being as big as Central Australia. But you forget that a tropical forest may be even more impassable than a waterless desert, and ranges of mountains, like those among which the mighty Usamacinta gathers its waters, are not quite as easily crossed as the Alps or the Pyrenees. But the merely physical difficulties might be overcome; the great trouble is that all this unexplored region is beset by Lacandones, Manches, and other tribes of fierce and unsubdued

Indians, whom, in order to reach the Phantom Island and City, you must either evade or subdue. I do not say that it is impossible to evade them, but nobody has done it yet; while, as for subduing, it is enough to say that the Spanish conquistadores found it expedient to let them alone. It is the other way about, indeed. The Indians who were conquered in times past are fast regaining their savage independence. Even Merida, with its 50,000 inhabitants, is in mortal terror of them. In 1846 the Indians swept a great part of Yucatan with fire and sword. Valladolid and Tekax were abandoned, and thousands of square miles of territory, and hundreds of towns and villages, once occupied by a Creole population, mostly of Spanish blood, have reverted to their original owners.

“However, to resume my story. While I was pondering these things, making occasional visits to ruined cities, and forming rather aimless plans for more distant excursions, I heard of a project for establishing a new mission in the Verapaz country, and offered to take charge of it. My offer was accepted. Most of my friends thought me a great fool for exchanging the pleasures of Merida for the hard life of a missionary priest in a region remote from civilisation, inhabited, as they said, only by Indians, mosquitoes, and alligators. But it was exactly the place I wanted to go to—between Cozabon and Coban, and on the borders of the country where was to be found, if anywhere, the aboriginal city and the Phantom Island of the legend. So

I went, and stayed there a pretty long time. I cannot say I liked it very much, however. True, my flock, consisting of tame Indians and half-breeds, and a few Creoles, were good and kind, and treated me with almost too much reverence and respect. But the dullness of the place was terrible, the climate detestable, and the insects were as trying as all the plagues of Egypt put together; for Puebla lies low down in the *tierra caliente*. Pride, and other considerations, however, forbade me to go back, and want of means and the impossibility of leaving my charge for long together, prevented me from attempting to carry out my great object—the discovery of the Phantom City. Yet I made several excursions and picked up some useful information, and by a strange chance I met the *cura* who was said to have seen it from the top of a high mountain south of the Usamacinta. It turned out, however, that it was not himself that had seen it, but a Chiché Indian whom he had known. He said the man was thoroughly trustworthy, and quite believed his story. It was that the Indian had once seen the city a long way off, and his account so far confirmed the legend that he declared the walls were white, and some of the buildings covered with plates of silver and gold. When asked why he did not enter the Phantom Country (the only name we had for it) he said that its inhabitants, the Children of Light, as they call themselves, are in alliance with certain of the Lacandones and Manches, who remorselessly put to death

all strangers who approach their territory, and that he himself could not have gone a step further without the certainty of falling into their hands. As it was, he only escaped them by stealth, and got back with great difficulty. Another thing he said was, that the Children of Light are quite a different race of men from the wild tribes that haunt the forests and the mountains—which is very likely, I should say.

“I thought that, on the whole, this account might be true—perhaps because I wanted it to be. The trouble was that I could get no precise information, either as to the city or the mountain from which it had been seen. South of the Usamacinta might mean almost anywhere north of the eighteenth degree of south latitude, for the great river rises nobody knows where, and falls into the Gulf of Mexico at the Laguna de los Terminos. But the point was of less importance than it might have been, as at that time I saw no chance of my being able to engage in an enterprise of so much pith and moment as a search for the mysterious city. A little later, however, circumstances became more propitious. An old friend at Merida, a Yucatanero, who had made money in the United States of the North, left me a legacy which, though perhaps small when judged by European ideas, was for me a small fortune. So I gave up the priesthood—for which, to tell the truth, I had never any real vocation—and resolved to make at least one attempt to penetrate to the unexplored regions of Verapaz. The first thing was to fix on a starting

point, which, after mature consideration, I decided should be a little to the westward of Santa Rosa; the next, to engage and organise a force of friendly Indians who would act both as escort, carriers, and guides: for I was about to adventure into a country where beasts of burden could not travel, where I was not sure of finding food, and where I might at any moment be attacked by the savage Lacandones, or the still more savage Manches. We should, therefore, have to carry our supplies on our backs and our lives in our hands. Carriage, however, presented no difficulty; the Indians of Central America being accustomed to transport heavy burdens great distances. About their staunchness, however, I was far from confident; Christianised natives are terribly afraid of their wild kinsfolk; and I did not feel at all sure that my men would not desert me when I most needed their help, the more especially as, being compelled by the custom of the country to pay them beforehand, I could have no security for their good behaviour.

“But all went well for a while. Certainly, there was no track, and, like ships at sea, we had to steer by compass; though, unlike ships, we could not go straight, and made very slow progress. We had to make so many detours, sometimes to avoid a swamp, sometimes to find a pass over a mountain, or a ford over a river, that, after a fortnight's hard work, we were not more than forty miles from our starting point, as the crow flies, though I suppose we had really travelled three times that distance.

“My men were beginning to grumble—they forgot the pay, and thought only of the hard work—when, after a more than usually toilsome march, all against the collar, we reached an open, park-like country, which, judging from the extensive view it commanded, must be a high table-land; but as I had, unfortunately, brought no barometer, I could not tell how high. Below us was a vast savanna, or valley, bounded by lofty white-crested mountains. Whether the whiteness denoted snow, or merely limestone or other light-coloured rocks, it was impossible, at that distance, to determine. I fancied, too, that I could make out a city, or the ruins of one. My men—who saw better with the naked eye than I did with my glass—declared that they could distinguish white walls and pyramids, which shone like gold. On the other hand, it did not answer to the description of the *cura's* Chiché! There was no sign of water. The place we saw, or thought we saw, could not, therefore, be on an island. But the Chiché might be mistaken, or—another supposition—there might be a second hidden city, hitherto unheard-of, unknown even to tradition. Be that as it might, the idea that I was on the point of making a great find delighted and excited me beyond measure. Greatly to my surprise, however, my men seemed much discouraged—alarmed, even; and when I inquired the reason, said that we must now be in the very heart of the Choles country, at the best a dangerous enough position. If we were really

within sight of the Phantom City, the danger was greater still—nobody had ever succeeded in reaching it—and it was as much as our lives were worth to go another step further. They wanted to go back, in fact. This put me in a rage. I reproached the men for their faithlessness, reminded them of their engagements, and said that nothing should turn me from my purpose—that I should go on at all hazards.

“As for the Lacandonese, and other savage tribes, I had begun to doubt their existence. We had not, so far, seen a single human being, or sign of any, except a wretched Tree Indian, two or three days before, who disappeared the moment he set eyes on us.

“My men—silenced, if not convinced—lighted a fire, and set about preparing our evening meal. After it was eaten, and we had smoked the pipe of peace, we lay down and disposed ourselves for sleep. I chose a place a little distance from the fire, near the trunk of a gigantic tree; for my men, besides being loud snorers, were too high-smelling to make them desirable bed-fellows.

“I cannot tell how long I slept, but when I awoke the embers of the fire were still faintly glowing, and the tree-tops were bathed in the soft light of a radiant moon. I raised myself on my elbow, and looked round. Was I dreaming? I rubbed my eyes, and looked again.

“It was no illusion: my men were gone, taking everything with them, and I was left alone in that wilderness, to get back as I might, for going forward

was now out of the question. My heart sank within me, for how could I get back alone? and I was about to spring to my feet and try to find out which way the wretches had gone, when I became conscious of shadowy forms moving among the trees on the opposite side of the glade. My first thought was that these were my own people, but a second look showed me that I was mistaken. My men numbered only a dozen, but yonder were two or three score, big fellows wearing plumed head-dresses, cloaks of skin, and armed with spears and bows.

“I am not ashamed to confess, Señor Doctor, being a man of peace, that the sight utterly overcame me. I remembered all I had heard of the horrible tortures these Indians of the wilds inflict on their prisoners. I was petrified with fear. For two or three minutes I hardly dared to breathe, and could not move a limb. The horrors of that moment, words cannot tell. And then my senses gradually returned, and I dragged myself away—crawled on my belly like a snake—in the hope that I might in that way escape unobserved. But I had not gone far when a yell that seemed to freeze my blood in my veins told me that I was seen. Bounding to my feet, I ran as I had never run before—ran for dear life, the fiends in full cry after me. Knowing that I had no chance of out-racing them, I made for a *barranca*—a deep and wide ravine, of a sort frequent in the country—which I had noticed as we climbed up the hill.

“As I ran I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder; but the arrow, hurriedly shot, did not penetrate deeply into the flesh; if it had done, I should not be here to tell the tale. I shook it off, and raced onward for the *barranca*. I could not look back, but I knew my pursuers were close after me; and when I reached the ravine I jumped, or rather dropped, slap into it. Better break my neck, I thought, than be roasted alive by those savages.

“I have no idea how far I fell, but after crawling through a lot of bushes, which cut my flesh, and tore my clothes to rags, I brought to, stunned and breathless, on a tree, or the branch of one. I could hear the savages shouting and exclaiming in the forest above. I knew very well, though, that they would not follow me, and as the *barranca*, besides being of considerable depth, was probably many miles in length, I did not think they were likely to outflank me. In all probability, moreover, they would imagine I was killed outright, and in that belief give all their attention to the finding of my fugitive convoy. And so it turned out; at any rate, I saw no more of them.

“When daylight came, though precious little of it reached me, I surveyed my position as well as I could. It was not particularly encouraging. I sat in the branches of a tree that grew almost at right angles from the side of the *barranca*, neither the top nor the bottom of which was visible. I could not stay where I was, that was quite clear, and equally clear that I

could not go up. There was, consequently, nothing for it but to go down ; and down I went, slipping from one bush to another, sometimes falling a few feet, sometimes holding on to a tree, until I reached terra firma, which proved to be the bed of a stream—in the rainy season, no doubt, a foaming torrent—but just then, save for a pool here and there, quite dry. I had no doubt about the direction I should take—it could only be downhill—and I felt sure that if I went on I should come out in the neighbourhood of some river or brook.

“It took me more than twenty-four hours to get out of that ravine, and all the time I did not once taste food. If it had not been for the pools I just spoke about, I think I must have died. I will not trouble you with all the details of that terrible journey, nor dwell on the intense satisfaction I experienced when at last I emerged into the light of day ; how I killed a monkey with a stick and ate him raw, how I gorged myself with wild bananas, and, following the bendings of a tiny river, fell in with a Christianised Indian, who conducted me to Santa Rosa.

“I told you that when we reached the glade where my Indians deserted me, I thought we were about forty miles from our starting point, in a straight line. I saw reason afterwards to modify that opinion. By the *bar-ranca* I don't think we were above a score—in fact we had gone no distance worth mentioning—and although I could not recommend anybody to take that way, it is

unquestionably the nearest. And I am sure I shall not try it again, nor any other."

"You have no idea, then, of making another attempt to find the Phantom City, even if you recover your health?"

"No, I have not, Señor Doctor. One adventure of that sort is quite enough for a man of my age. Another like it would kill me outright. I have never been well since. I had a terrible attack of dysentery at Santa Rosa, and that and the wound seem to have completely ruined my constitution. But I will try your Swiss prescription, and see what that will do for me. Ah! what's that?"

"That" was a loud shouting and heavy trampling overhead, and at the same time the air darkened and the intense heat gave place to a refreshing coolness. Handsome Tommy's forebodings about the weather were coming true.

"I will go on deck and see what is the matter," I said, "but first take this draught, and be quiet. You have excited yourself too much."

CHAPTER III.

GONE.

CAPTAIN TOBIAS was on the quarter-deck; his bronzed and manly features, though fixed and stern, bespoke neither anxiety nor apprehension, and he gave his orders with as much coolness and self-possession as if he were preparing for a summer day's journey, instead of a strife with the elements which might end in the destruction of his ship and the loss of all our lives. The men were making all snug—furling the sails, doubly securing the boats, battening down the hatches, and removing from the deck every object that could be removed.

“It's coming,” said the skipper, when he saw me—
“a regular buster.”

“It's likely to be a fresh gale then?”

“A gale! I wish it was. No, my lad, it's a cyclone we are in for, and unless I am mistaken, a cyclone that we shall all of us remember as long as we live—if we live through it. The barometer has been going down with a run, and, look there!” (pointing seaward).

The cloud, only an hour before no bigger than a man's hand, was now intensely black, and covered the

entire horizon like a pall. It grew more threatening every moment, and seemed as if it were hastening to meet and devour the now fast-reddening sun. The wind was rising too, and Tobias had to shout his orders through his speaking-trumpet.

"I cannot send you on board the *Guadalquivir*," he said, "you will have to be my guest to-night. But you are quite as safe here as on the big 'un, safer perhaps."

"Thanks, very much," I answered. "I will be your guest with pleasure, Captain Tobias. It will be easy to join the *Guadalquivir* in the morning."

"I hope so; but whether it will or not remains to be seen. By Jove! what is Shenstone up to? Manning the capstan! Getting up steam! He is surely not going to weigh? He is, as sure as I'm a sinner. And see there! They are holding up a board with something chalked on it. What can it be, I wonder?"

With that, Handsome Tommy put his glass to his eye and read aloud: "I am going to another anchorage."

"Going to another anchorage! Well, I don't think you are wise, Shenstone. I shall stay where I am. I don't know of any better holding ground hereabouts than this."

And then the *Guadalquivir* steamed ahead, and took up another berth, but not so far off that we could not easily distinguish her dark hull, tapering masts, and big red funnels, even in the fast-waning light. For the

clouds were now overspreading the face of the sun, which looked as if it were shining through a hole, and threw into the water a solid shaft of crimson fire that cast a lurid glare on the black vault above.

A few minutes after the *Guadalquivir* had left her moorings, another steamer, under double-reefed topsails, emerged from the darkness, and crossed this streak of light, which brought every spar of her, and almost every rope, into full relief. Her funnels were sending out great volumes of smoke, and she was evidently steaming full speed.

"It is the *Ganges*," said Tobias, taking a long look through his glass; "the Colon boat, I suppose. Thompson, finding that he was likely to be in the thick of the cyclone, thought it better to run back. Quite right too. He is not coming here though; making for St. Thomas's. I hope he may get there in time."

Handsome Tommy now gave orders to let go the sheet anchor, and pay out more cable.

"We must make fast if we don't want to be driven ashore," he said, smiling. "You are getting steam up, I suppose, Mr. Malcolm?" (to the chief engineer, who stood by).

"It is up now, Captain Tobias," answered the Scot, imperturbably. "Whenever you give the word we are ready."

"Why are you getting steam up?" I asked, in some surprise. "I thought you were going to stay here."

"So we are—if we can. But how if the cables

part, or the anchors drag? What would become of us then? Nobody who has not been in a cyclone can form an idea of what wind can do when it travels at the rate of a hundred miles an hour, with a pressure of fifty pounds to the square foot. I think I can give you an idea, though."

With that Handsome Tommy whipped into his cabin. The next minute he reappeared with a bit of wood in his hand. It was part of a shutter, such as is commonly used in the West Indies, made of inch stuff, through which had been forced a square piece of equally thick roofing tile, and it still stuck there, hard and fast.

"That was done in the last cyclone at St. Thomas's," said the skipper. "I keep it as a curiosity. If that bit of tile had struck a man it would have smashed his skull, or buried itself in his body. And many a poor fellow will meet his death in that way before tomorrow morning, I fear. I think one is almost as safe at sea as ashore in a cyclone, after all."

This was not very reassuring. The captain evidently thought we were in great danger; and I could not disguise from myself that I might not live to see the light of another day, for, if the worst befell, escape would be out of the question. No man could swim, no boat live, in such a storm as that which was so nearly upon us. In spite of what Tobias had said, I began to regret having come aboard the *Tobasco*. A big ship always gives a greater sense of safety, and generally is safer than a

little one. Moreover, the *Guadalquivir* was brand-new and built of iron; the *Tobasco*, timber-built and old. But there was no help for it now; and, being fortunately blessed with a sanguine temperament, I hoped for the best, and went below to impart the news to my patient, which, in consideration for his weak state, I meant to do in such a way as to alarm him as little as might be.

"The wind is freshening, and it is likely to blow hard before morning," I said.

"But we are surely not going to sail!" exclaimed Señor Domingo, in great alarm. "I would much rather go ashore. Storms in these latitudes are dangerous."

When I told him that we were not going to move until the weather mended, he gave a sigh of relief.

"I detest the sea," he said, "and, I confess it frankly, I am mortally afraid of a storm."

I began to think that Father Polycarp was not exactly the most courageous of men; and there was something in his manner which made me suspect that, instead of his tame Indians having deserted him, he might possibly have deserted them. But perhaps I did him an injustice; he was not at all a bad fellow.

Then we talked again about the Phantom City, his account of which had greatly excited my curiosity. He did not seem to have the slightest doubt of its existence.

"If I were as young and strong as you are," he

said, "I would have another try to find it. But I should not start from the same place."

"Where from, then?"

"I would either start from Flores, on the Laguna de Peten, and cross the Verapaz mountains into the valley of the Usamacinta, or follow the course of the Rio de la Passion, until it strikes the big river, and then try back. The Phantom City is most probably situated on or near one of the affluents of the Usamacinta, the source of which, as I told you, has never been discovered."

"You don't think, then, that you saw it that time?"

"Frankly, I don't. A city perhaps, but not the city, and if inhabited, only by Lacandones, Manches, and such-like ruffians. The Children of Light, if the stories we have heard be only partially true, are of another race and highly civilised."

"So you said. Do you know, I almost feel as if I should like to have a look for it myself!"

"Do you, really? If I felt sure you would—— But it is a big undertaking, and will cost some money. You might have to make several attempts before you succeeded; and I was about to say——Holy Virgin protect us! We are going to the bottom; the ship is over on her side."

Señor Domingo's alarm was premature. The *Tobasco* had simply made a roll, and swung round rather violently, as if struck by a big sea or a sudden squall.

The next moment she was herself again. All the same, the sensation was not a pleasant one, and my patient narrowly missed being thrown out of his hammock. So, after getting him into his bunk, which I thought the best place for him under the circumstances, I went once more on deck to see how the weather was shaping.

It had become worse rapidly during the last half-hour. Dark clouds, streaked with red, completely veiled the sun; the sea looked black and ugly, and there was a heavy swell on. Although we were under the lee of the land, the wind shrieked viciously among the shrouds, and the limit of the horizon was marked by a line of white foam.

"Every man secure himself," sang out Handsome Tommy, in a voice that was heard from stem to stern.

And then he lashed himself to the capstan. I did the same. The line of foam came nearer; and as it approached I saw that it was a veritable wall of seething water, which towered high above the *Tobasco's* bulwarks. It fell on the deck with a shock that made the old ship reel like a drunken man, sweeping everything before it that was not part and parcel of the solid mass. The boats were torn away as if they had been fastened with pack-threads; and an unfortunate sailor, who had neglected the captain's warning, went with them; his despairing cry, as he was dashed into the sea, ringing high above the roar of the storm.

The wind rose every minute, and went on rising for hours. The strain on the cables was terrific, and

towards midnight the best bower parted with a report like the firing of a big gun. This contingency Tobias had foreseen, and the next moment the engines were going full speed, to ease the strain on our remaining cable; and so terrible was the force of the wind that this was all they could do. If the sheet anchor had dragged, or the second cable parted, nothing could have saved us. Tobias kept the deck; the first officer watched the cable (on which a rope had been bent to ease the strain); and Malcolm was at his post in the engine-room. When the wind lulled speed was reduced; when it rose full steam was again put on. Every man on board knew that our lives depended on the staunchness of a chain and the strength of the engines. The breaking of a link or the starting of a bolt would have sent us all in a few brief minutes to eternity.

And so passed the night—a night of intense anxiety and agonising suspense. I learnt then, for the first time, how impotent is man in presence of the unchained forces of Nature, what waifs in God's world we are, and how little we can do to shape the destinies which sometimes, in our vanity, we think we can control.

Towards morning the storm began to abate; the wind went down faster than it had risen; the sun rose in an azure sky, grandly serene, and utterly heedless of the havoc and misery which the night had wrought.

“What has become of the *Guadalquivir*?” I asked

Tobias, looking in the direction where we had last seen her.

Tobias looked too. Then he swept the horizon with his glass.

"The *Guadalquivir* is gone," he said, solemnly.

"Gone! You surely don't mean——"

The honest fellow bowed his head. His eyes were brimming with tears. Like myself, he had many dear friends on board the *Guadalquivir*.

"But are you sure?" I gasped. "May she not have gone somewhere else—to St. Thomas's, for instance?"

For answer Tobias handed me his glass.

I looked, and saw, sticking out of the water, something like a long pole, at the end of which streamed a red pennant.

"The *Guadalquivir*'s topmast?"

The skipper nodded.

"And the people on board of her? Don't you think it possible some of them may be saved?"

"Not one. All are gone. Think what a night it was."

"And if you had not sent for me to see Señor Domingo, I should be gone too," I said, grasping Tommy's hand.

"Yes—rather a narrow squeak. A fortunate accident, some would say. But I don't believe in accidents, and don't you, Dr. Carlyon. Thank God for it! It is He who saved, not your life only, but all our lives, last

night. Think of it! That fine ship, new, and on her first voyage, gone to the bottom, while the old *Tobasco* has lived through it all; and, except for the loss of her boats and a few spars, is very little the worse. It is true what the Old Book says—‘The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.’”

Captain Tobias must have been deeply moved to make so long a speech, for he was a man of few words. But in what he said, and the events of the past night, there was food for serious thought; and as I leaned, sad and pensive, over the taffrail, I mused, long and deeply, on the strange dispensation which, within a few hours, had twice saved my life, and brought me in contact with this Spanish priest—I forgot, for the moment, he was an Irishman. All this pointed to something. Could it be that I was the destined discoverer of the hidden city and the mysterious people of which he had told me, and which had already so greatly excited my curiosity?

CHAPTER IV.

DOMINICK'S PROPOSAL.

THOUGH I had been often on deck during the night, I spent the greater part of the time with my patient, who suffered much both from sea-sickness and fear. If he had been in better health he would probably have shown greater courage; but few men, whether they are well or ill, can go through such an experience as that which had just befallen us without experiencing some unpleasant sensations.

Morning, which brought relief for all, unfortunately brought an aggravation of the feverish symptoms from which Señor Domingo had been suffering the day before, and I began to fear that I should have some difficulty in pulling him through. He had no reserve of strength; and a malady that in ordinary circumstances would have been easily enough cured, might prove too much for his enfeebled constitution. But the cyclone, which wrought so much evil, did also some good. By purifying and cooling the air, it brought about a notable diminution in the yellow fever and cholera which had been ravaging several of the West India Islands, and were especially virulent at St. Thomas's. It is quite possible, indeed, that the

storm saved more lives than it destroyed ; and, though I would not venture to say that it saved my patient, I am sure that, had the intense heat continued, it would have gone very hard with him. Another circumstance that told in his favour was my involuntary sojourn on board the *Tobasco* ; and, my own ship being lost, I was compelled to stay there altogether. Mr. Dominick, as he now desired to be called, thus became my sole patient ; and, as everybody knows, or ought to know, the more attention a doctor can give to a sick man the greater are his chances of recovery.

The cyclone and its consequences naturally threw the sailing arrangements of the Royal Mail Company's fleet a good deal out of gear. The good ship *Guadalquivir*, which should have carried the mails to England, was lying fathoms deep in Caribbean waters ; and the *Ganges*, a fine steamer that might have taken her place, had received so much damage in the cyclone that she required extensive repairs, and would not be in a condition to sail for weeks. Under these circumstances, the company's agent at St. Thomas's decided to send the *Tobasco* to England with the remaining mails and the few passengers who had survived the tempest. True, she was rather old, but she was staunch, and her captain had proved himself a bold and skilful seaman, and well deserved promotion. So we had to run across to St. Thomas's, discharge one cargo and take in another, get fresh boats and more stores, replenish our water-casks and fill up our coal bunkers, operations which took

a good deal of time ; and only on the third day after he got sailing orders was Tobias able to weigh anchor and shape his course for Southampton.

Our passengers numbered only some half a dozen, one of whom was Dominick. He had been rather disposed to continue his journey to Cuba ; but when I assured him that his life depended on his getting away from the tropics forthwith he resolved to take my advice and passage with the *Tobasco*.

“ I have become so much accustomed to this part of the world, and like it so well, that I leave it with great reluctance,” he said. “ But all that a man hath will he give for his life, and really, you know, I don’t want to die any sooner than I can help. So we will sail together to England, *amigo mio*. Providence evidently means us to be friends. It has thrown us together in a marvellous way. My illness was the means of saving your life, and I think I may say that your skill has saved mine.”

This was on the day we sailed. A few days later the fever had entirely left him, and by the time we sighted the Lizard he was convalescent. He sat and walked all day long on the deck, and rapidly regained his strength. Returning health, moreover, wrought a great change in his temper and manner. From being gloomy, morose, and irritable (with an occasional lucid interval), he became bright, cheerful, and genial. His gratitude to me was unbounded, and at times somewhat effusive, for he had the traditional Celtic temperament, and his

language was often characterised by that strain of high-flown exaggeration peculiar to the people among whom he had spent the greater part of his life. In vain I urged the absurdity of being grateful to a medical man.

"It is my duty to cure my patients if I can," I said, "just as it is a shipmaster's duty to save his ship if he can. You might as well be grateful to Tobias for not making a false reckoning, and running the *Tobasco* on a sunken rock, or to an engine-driver for not running you off the line."

"Nonsense! Your conduct has not been that of an ordinary doctor, and you know it. You have not only treated me skilfully, you have nursed me like a brother, and watched over me day and night—day and night. You have saved my life, and I insist on being grateful. My own brother, or my own son—if it were possible for a priest to have a son—could not have shown greater kindness and devotion."

"Because I had nothing else to do. You are my sole patient, remember."

"Santissima Maria! How cold and unresponsive you English are! Yet if you are cold and proud, you are neither greedy nor vain. A French or a Spanish doctor would have taken all the praise he could get, and a thumping fee besides. But what am I saying? If I had been attended by a Spanish doctor it is food for fish I should be this moment. But never mind; you have saved my life, and that is enough for me. And I am going to ask you to add to the obligation."

“I am sure I shall only be too glad—anything in my power—how, might I ask?”

“By completing the undertaking in which I failed—the discovery of the Phantom City. You are just the man for it—young, robust, and stalwart, and, as I could tell by the look of you—even if you had not proved it that night of the cyclone—as bold as a lion. You know Spanish, too, which counts for a good deal, and your surgical skill and scientific knowledge will avail you much. Yes, you are just the man. You have all the qualifications. If anybody can find the Phantoms you can, Señor Doctor.”

“You are pleased to flatter me, Mr. Dominick. But, I confess it, I should like to attempt this enterprise. The legend you speak of and your descriptions of the country have roused my curiosity. I had no idea there was so much of Central America still unexplored and inhabited only by tribes of unconquered and mysterious Indians. Yes, I should like to find the Phantom City, and if I did not find that, I should be sure to find much that is well worth seeing. All the same, I don’t quite see my way.”

“See your way! Well, I don’t think you are likely to do that, unless you get yourself fitted with a pair of wings,” laughed Dominick. “You will have to feel your way, and leave a good deal to Providence. Ways are few, and bad at that, in Central America, *amigo mio*. Why, the *Camino real*—the royal road—is only like a big furrow through a ploughed field!”

"I do not mean seeing my way in that sense, reverend sir (Dominick winced, he did not like to be reminded of his sacred calling). To speak frankly, it is with me a question of money. My father left me only a small income—about a hundred a year. The pay of a ship's surgeon is no great shakes, and I fear I am not so careful as I should be. Anyhow, I have so little beforehand, that I could not possibly afford to spend several months, perhaps years, travelling in Central America."

"I am delighted to hear you say so, my dear sir; I feared you might be a rich man. Yes, I am delighted beyond measure."

"Delighted that I am a poor man, Mr. Dominick. But why?" I exclaimed, in some surprise, for his delight was evidently quite sincere.

"Because it gives me an opportunity of proving the reality of my gratitude, and promoting a good cause at the same time. I told you I had inherited a thrifle of money, did not I?"

"From a Yucatanero, who had made a pile in the United States of the North."

"Exactly. He called me his dear friend and spiritual father, the decent man, and left me a matter of twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand pounds! And you call that a trifle of money. I call it a fine fortune."

"I don't like to exaggerate, my dear sir. There is nothing so much becomes a man as modesty. And

there are people—Rothschild and Vanderbilt for instance—who would look upon twenty thousand pounds as quite an unconsidered trifle—unless you asked them for a loan of the same, and then they would be as hard as if they had not another cent. Well, yes, it is a fine fortune, and to tell the truth I feel myself awfully rich, a regular Crœsus; all the more so, as, having invested my wealth in a country where interest is high, it makes me a larger income than I should be after getting from your British Consols, which are only securities for millionaires. I don't spend a third of it—couldn't, in fact, if I tried. And now to business. If you'll oblige me by undertaking this search for the Phantom City, I'll place a thousand pounds at your disposal as soon as ever we are on dry land, and when that is spent, as much more as you want. What say you to that, *amigo mio*?"

"I accept your offer with all my heart, and pledge myself to find the Phantom City—if it exists—or perish in the attempt."

"Spoken like a true Englishman. You English have some good points, though you do behave so badly to ould Ireland. I will say that. But I don't think you will perish. You have a lucky look, and the Providence that protected you so marvellously in West Indian waters will not desert you in Central American wilds. Anyhow, you may be quite easy in your mind. If anything happens—if you should—if you should not come back—I'll provide handsomely for your widdy."

"Widow! Why, I am not married."

"But you may be. We none of us know what trials are before us, and there are some very pretty girls in Yucatan," said the reverend gentleman, with a look that made me laugh.

"It is very well to provide for contingencies, but to talk of providing for a man's widow before he gets a wife is rather too suggestive to be altogether pleasant," I answered.

"Well, perhaps it is. And now I am going to tell you something which is unpleasantly suggestive for me. I intend to make you my heir."

"Your heir! You are joking, Mr. Dominick."

"Devil a bit. I mean, not at all. When I reach England I shall make a will, and leave you my 'universal legatee,' as the Spaniards say. All the same, I hope it will be a long time before you come into your fortune, for I enjoy life too much to want to quit it before the end of the century."

"I hope so too. But you are too generous, my dear sir. I have no claim on you, and there are those who have. And your relations in Ireland—I should be sorry for you to deprive them of what is rightly theirs."

"Dear, dear, Doctor Carlyon! For a man of superior education, with a head on his shoulders, you talk very much at random. I will answer your objections seriatim. How can I be too generous when I only propose to leave you what I cannot take away with me? You have

a claim on me, and a very great one, more than any other human being. My relations in Ireland are nearly all dead, and those who still live I don't like; and, finally, nothing that is mine can rightly be theirs. I have made up my mind to make you my heir, and nothing shall prevent me. But don't fear (smiling), I shall not put you in the way of a temptation that might be too great a trial for your virtue. After the document is signed, I mean to take no more of your physic, Señor Doctor. *Quien sabe?* (who knows?) you might be putting *curare* in it, and that would not cure me, I'm thinking. And now about the exploration. When will you start?"

"I shall send in my resignation as soon as we reach Southampton, and be ready to start after a fortnight's run ashore."

"Good; your promptitude augurs well for your success. Where will you go first?"

"Where you may advise."

"Well, you have plenty of choice in the way of routes. Merida, Belize, Campeachy, Carmen, Guatemala," said Mr. Dominick, thoughtfully. "But, everything considered, you had perhaps better go first to Merida. I have good friends there, who will give you all the help and information in their power. You should learn something of one of the Indian languages, too; and, though there is as great a confusion of tongues among the aborigines as there was at the Tower of Babel, Mayan is said to be the oldest, and will probably be the

most useful. I should not be at all surprised if it is the language spoken by the Children of Light."

"Why do they call themselves Children of Light?"

"Heaven only knows! Perhaps because they are light-complexioned or light-haired. I hope it is not because they are light-fingered or light-headed."

"By-the-bye, Mr. Dominick, you never told me what became of those fellows who deserted you."

"Did not I? Oh, I believe the villains got safely home."

"Do you think they bolted before the appearance of those Indians with the poisoned arrows, or after?"

"After, of course. But the fact is I have not nerve to conduct such an expedition. I think you have. I ought to have shot that Tree Indian I told you about."

"Shot him! Why? He did not attack you."

"No, but he told the others, and they attacked me with a vengeance. Shoot every Tree Indian you see. That is my advice. You will regret it if you don't."

This recommendation to shoot people in cold blood, coming from a man so good-natured as Dominick, and a minister of the gospel to boot, startled me not a little; but, remembering his Irish blood and his Spanish training, I thought it would perhaps be as well not to enter into a discussion on the subject, and so let it drop.

"When will you go to Switzerland?" I asked.

"When you start for Central America," was the answer.

“I should advise you to stay in Europe a whole year.”

“How so? You said six months would make me another man.”

“So I think still. But if you want to effect a radical cure of that wound, and thoroughly renovate your constitution, you should have a full year in Europe. Spend the summer in the Alps and the winter in the Riviera.”

“I am in your hands, Dr. Carlyon, and I will do as you say. A year hence—no, better say thirteen months—we will try to meet at Merida. I, let us hope, with renovated health; you with a full account of the Phantom City and the Children of Light, and an exciting story of moving accidents by flood and field.”

“If I am there first I will wait for you; if you are there first you will wait for me. Is it agreed?”

“It is agreed.”

Shortly afterwards Dominick went his way and I went mine, and, as the reader will presently learn, a good many things happened before we met again.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS PENINSULA.

A FEW weeks later I was sailing in the track of the old Spanish navigators towards the setting sun. I voyaged by way of St. Thomas and Havana; and one fine morning, just as night was melting into day, a silvery haze uprose from the silent sea, revealing the low and sandy coast of Yucatan, which, in an age incalculably remote, may have stretched as far as Cuba, possibly as far as Africa. It is possible, too, that without it Europe would never have become a centre of civilisation, nor this island the home of our race, for many geographers hold that the Yucatan Peninsula diverts the Gulf Stream in a northerly direction, and, deprived of that warm current of the ocean, Britain would be a mass of ice and snow, and no fit habitation for man. Yet, if the prominent position of the Peninsula has done good, it has also wrought evil. By attracting the notice of Spanish discoverers, it led to the conquest of Anahuac, and the untold ills which have resulted from that dire event. Once the seat of an ancient civilisation, the splendid relics of which are scattered broadcast over the land, Yucatan is now an outlying state of the Mexican Republic; but a great part of

its nominal territory is held by unsubdued and revolted Indians, animated by feelings of deadly hatred towards the degenerate descendants of their former oppressors, who, unable to keep the land once conquered by their forefathers, are continually receding before an advancing flood of barbarism, which threatens ere long utterly to overwhelm them.

Beyond the landward limits of the Peninsula lies a mysterious country of virgin forests, vast rivers, and volcanic peaks, bounded on the south by a chain of lofty mountains, which pour their waters on the one side into the Gulf of Mexico, on the other into the Pacific Ocean.

It was somewhere in this unknown region that I hoped to find the Phantom City and the Children of Light.

Yet, though Yucatan is so interesting a country, there is nothing remarkable in the scenery of its coast, which contrasts almost painfully with the superb beauty of the Antilles, and the wild grandeur of the Spanish Main.

When the *Ganges* "let go" in rapidly shoaling water, several miles from land, and I saw a white sand-bank, hardly rising above sea-level, dotted with palm-trees, among which were interspersed a few tile-roofed houses and a long wharf, blazing in the sun, and was told that this was Progreso, the chief port of the Peninsula, I felt both disappointed and depressed. I had expected—I don't know why—something much more striking, and

I saw in this early disenchantment a bad augury for the success of my enterprise. But I was always too susceptible to outward influences; and though I have since, in a great measure, outgrown this weakness, I am not even yet proof against the depressing influence of a dull day or a melancholy landscape.

We—I mean the other passengers of the *Ganges* and myself—went ashore in a lighter, and were driven to Merida, some twenty-four miles from Progreso, in the carriage of the country—the Yucatecan *caleza*—which is not unlike the Cuban *volante*.

I liked Merida as much as I disliked Progreso. It has an old-world look, and its buildings—though the style of their architecture is mainly Moorish and Spanish—have about them something weird and mysterious, which reminds the beholder of the ruined buildings of Coban, and the vanished civilisation of the old Toltec race. As my *caleza* rattled through the quaint streets, I could see, through paneless and iron-barred windows, groups of lovely girls with pale faces, black lustrous eyes, and raven hair—imprisoned and curious beauties, for, except at Carnival time, the Yucataneros keep their women almost as closely secluded as if they were followers of the False Prophet and dwellers in some far Eastern clime.

Merida is one of the most favoured of American cities, for, though hot enough in all conscience, it is not unhealthy, and enjoys complete immunity from earthquakes and cyclones. I cannot truthfully say that the

men are brave, but they are wonderfully kind, and exquisitely courteous; and the women—at any rate, the young ones—are gracious and beautiful, with a beauty all their own; and their picturesque dress does not, like that of their European sisters, disguise or distort the natural shapeliness of their bodies. I was not surprised to learn that no native of Merida ever leaves it without a fixed intention to return and spend there the remainder of his days.

Dominick's letters of introduction procured me a friendly reception, and opened to me many hospitable doors. His name acted as a charm, for he was well known, and had been very popular in Merida; but, as his attempt to find the Phantom City was looked upon as Quixotic and slightly absurd, I took care not to disclose the true object of my visit; saying, merely, that I intended to explore the ruined cities of the neighbourhood, and might possibly go as far as Palenque in one direction, and Coban in the other. All the same, I found that everybody not only believed more or less in the existence of this particular city, far away in the South, but of other cities in Yucatan itself, where unconquered Indians still worship the gods of their fathers, and keep up their old customs, and into which no white man is allowed to enter. The Meridaneros tremble at their very name. If a stranger penetrates into their country, the wild men of the woods either incontinently hack him to pieces with their *machetes*, or, putting a ring through his nose, fasten him by a long line to a

stake, and torture him to death at leisure. These savages are rapidly extending their territory at the expense of the whites and the agricultural Indians; *ranch* and *hacienda* are being destroyed one after the other, and the land of their owners added to the possessions of the dreaded *sublevados* (insurgent Indians).

It is significant of the fear these *sublevados* inspire, that when I proposed to visit the ruins of Chichen-Itza, which are near their country, though only about thirty miles from Merida, I was strongly urged to engage a military escort. It seemed rather ridiculous, but as I neither wanted to be chopped in pieces with *machetes*, nor have a ring put through my nose, I did as I was advised.

Fortunately, no hostile Indians made their appearance; if they had done so I very much fear that the ragged soldiers of my escort would have left me in the lurch. And yet Merida has a population of fifty thousand, and the *sublevados*—whose haunt is chiefly in the north-west corner of the Peninsula—do not number more than six or seven thousand!

I will not inflict on my readers a description of the ruins of Chichen-Itza, nor of those of Uxmal and Aké, which I visited more than once. Words would fail to convey any adequate idea of their grandeur and magnificence, or of the impression they made on my mind. Some authorities assign to these mysterious monuments an antiquity of thousands of years; and one enthusiastic explorer has expressed the opinion that the cradle of the

world's civilisation must be sought in Central America. But so far as I was concerned, these speculations, however interesting, were of secondary importance. It was much more to the purpose that, according to an old tradition, there once existed in that part of the country where Yucatan, Guatemala, and Southern Mexico come together, a great theocratic State, whose capital bore the name of Xibalba (pronounced *Hibalba*), the very region I was bent on exploring.

Could it be, I asked myself, that Xibalba and the Phantom City were the same?

I spent the most of my time in studying the Mayan language, reading the works of Bernal Diaz, and other ancient and modern travellers, making inquiries about the country and the people, and otherwise preparing for my expedition. When it became known that I was a medical man I had soon several patients. I even earned a few dollars; and I believe that if I could have remained in the place I might have made a very fair practice. But I was anxious to be on the move; and a few weeks after my arrival I reluctantly quitted the Yucatecan capital, and began the first part of my inland journey.

After long thought, and much poring over maps, I resolved to make first for Campeachy, and go thence to Peten, either by the direct trail or by Carmen and the lower Usamacinta. But, as I could not well travel alone, even if it had been expedient, I engaged an Indian servant, who knew the country, and rejoiced in

the name of Pedro. Though short in stature, he was as muscular as a small Hercules, and as hard as nails. Chance, or, as Handsome Tommy would have said, Providence, also provided me with another companion. While staying at the Hotel Mexico, at Merida, I made the acquaintance of a Spaniard, who bore the high-sounding appellation of Señor Don Felipe Gomez de la Plata y Sombrero. He had been a play-actor at Madrid, a merchant's clerk at Cuba, a soldier in Nicaragua, and jack-of-all-trades in Guatemala. He had, moreover, seen a good deal of Central America, and spoke fluently the Mayan language. But, though rich in names, he was poor in purse; and when he knew that I was about to make a journey into the interior, he proposed to accompany me, "in any capacity," asking for no other remuneration than his keep. As he was a lively young fellow, and might, I thought, prove useful when we got further afield, I took him, on his own terms, as my assistant—a title of which he seemed very proud—promising that if I could turn his service to account I would give him regular pay. But I made it a condition that I should not be expected to address him by all his names and titles; he must choose the one he liked best, and drop the rest. To this he rather demurred, observing that his family was one of the noblest in all Aragon, and that he had in his veins some of the bluest blood of Spain. However, he ended by agreeing to be known as Don Gomez. The Don was a *sine quâ non*; and as it was not a very big mouthful, I

gracefully conceded the point. If I had dared, I would have dubbed him Sancho Panza; for though as determined as ever to go on, and full of hope as to the success of my adventure, it reminded me, in some respects, of that once undertaken by the famous Knight of La Mancha and his faithful servitor and squire.

CHAPTER VI.

CORNERED BY A CAYMAN.

WE had three beasts of burden : a horse and two mules. The horse I rode myself ; one mule carried Don Gomez ; the other, Pedro and the baggage. But in case of need, the Indian was quite capable of footing it all the way, and carrying our belongings on his shoulders—mine, rather, for, besides the clothes on his back, Señor de la Plata y Sombrero's entire equipment consisted of a tooth-brush and a banjo. As for Pedro, all he possessed were a pair of trousers, a shirt, which he wore outside them, a hat, and a *machete*—a long, broad, sword-like knife, which could be used with equal facility either to fell a tree or split a skull.

It is hardly necessary to say that we were armed. I had brought with me from England a repeating-rifle, a double-barrelled fowling-piece, and an army revolver. I carried the rifle and the revolver, Gomez the fowling-piece, with which he seemed greatly pleased, and which he handled as if he knew how to use it.

The Spaniard was a great rattle, and an amusing companion. He had the art of putting everybody in good-humour ; and when we made a halt at a hacienda, there was nothing he liked better than to play a few airs on his banjo, and perhaps sing a song or two for the

benefit of our hosts, who—though the Don's performance was mediocre, and his voice harsh—found the entertainment so much to their liking that they often pressed us to prolong our stay; for it is one of the delights of travel in Northern Yucatan, that any *hacendado* (estate-owner) at whose house you may call will give you courtly welcome and ungrudging hospitality, thinking himself more than repaid by a friendly gossip and the latest news from Europe or the States. Inns there are none.

The part of the Peninsula through which we were travelling was flat and—owing to its sunny climate, often too sunny to be pleasant—somewhat arid. Yucatan is, in truth, a great coral reef, totally destitute of surface water; and without its mysterious underground streams and lakelets, the country would be a desert. The rain percolates through the porous ground, hollows out huge caverns, and forms deep pools, which are said to communicate either with the river system of the south, or the lagoons of the coast; a theory that, judging by a rather startling bit of comedy in which I played the leading part, is very likely to be true.

Many of these pools, known as *cenotes*, being easily accessible, are utilised as bathing-places—and glorious baths they make. Imagine a cavern, forty or fifty feet deep, broken down at one side, and forming on the other an arch of stalagmite and stalactite, the haunt of winged creatures innumerable. Coco palms and avocado pear-trees grow at the bottom, thrusting their verdant crowns into a garden where great oranges hang in

clusters, and rich flowers perfume the air. A flight of stone steps leads to the water's edge; and as you look upwards you see swallows circling in dense masses above the opening, while lizards and iguanas dart about the ledges of the rock, and hide among the tree-roots which hang from the coral roof of the *cenote*. The water is clear and deep, and exquisitely cool.

When, after riding all day under a burning sun, you reach your journey's end almost too exhausted to speak, your skin, it may be, smarting with mosquito bites and itching to madness with prickly heat, I know of no luxury to compare with a plunge into one of these fairy lakelets. It is as if you had taken a deep draught of the elixir of life; you leave your woes in the water, and come out a fresh creature, refreshed and reinvigorated both in body and mind.

Fairy lakelets, with magic waters, are these Yucatecan *cenotes*, yet not always the haunts of fays (only when Mayan maidens bathe in their cool recesses).

Arriving one evening at a hacienda, after a particularly hard and dusty ride, I asked, almost before I dismounted, if there happened to be a *cenote* thereabouts.

"Certainly," was the answer; "in that grove of mimosa and ceiba trees yonder, beyond the *alameda* (shaded walk)."

The next moment I was hurrying as fast as my stiffened legs would allow me in the direction pointed out.

A big *cenote*, under the shade of tall trees with trailing branches; a deep oval pool, at least sixty feet

wide, evidently the reach of a large underground river. After the intense heat and the blazing sunshine, the green coolness and the dim religious light of the cavern were inexpressibly grateful and refreshing. In two minutes I had doffed my clothes and taken a header into the crystal water. Right up the middle of the pool ran a reef of crimson coral; but in the centre of it was a gap through which I swam, and, on reaching the other side, I sat me down on a ledge, drew a long breath, and looked round. Overhead were the usual rocky vault, pendent roots, and darting lizards, and the air outside was thick with wheeling troops of swallows and hornets.

Heaving a deep sigh of pleasure and relief, I dropped once more into the fairy pool, and was making for the gap, when I saw something black sticking out of the water. What was it? where could it have come from? I asked myself. I went nearer; I looked a second time. Horror! it was the snout of an enormous alligator.

In less time than it takes to tell I was back on the ledge.

No, I was not mistaken. I could hear the snapping of the creature's jaws, which looked big enough to take me in at a single mouthful. I sat there fully half an hour, hoping he would go away, for there was no road out except by the gap. But as he did not show the slightest intention to move, I began to get impatient, and thought how I should get rid of him. I had heard that alligators, like sharks, were easily frightened by noises. I made noises. I splashed the water, I yelled,

I shouted, I threw stones, greatly to the surprise of the lizards, which darted about more frantically than ever. But it was not the least use. The cayman remained there, as immovable as fate, always with his snout out of the water, and glaring at me with his dull leaden eyes. Then I tried to stare him out. I might as well have tried to stare a knot out of a tree.

There was clearly nothing for it but to wait until I was rescued. My absence will alarm Gomez, I thought, and he is sure to come here and look for me.

So he did, but not for an unconscionably long time. The Don was a devoted admirer of the fair sex, and, while I was at the *cenote*, he was philandering with the girls of the hacienda, strumming on his banjo, and singing love songs in his own unlovely voice. It was only when Pedro suggested that the Señor Doctor was a long time with his bathing that Gomez knew I had not come back, and it occurred to him that it might be as well to look after me.

By this time the sun had set, but there was a moon that did almost as well, and when he and Pedro came down into the *cenote* I could see them, though they could not see me.

"Señor Doctor! Señor Doctor! Are you here?" shouted the Don.

"Yes, I am very much here," I answered, with a shiver, for I was sitting stark naked on a cold and not very smooth stone, and the moonbeams, though bright, were not particularly warm.

“It gives me immense pleasure to hear you say so, Señor Doctor. We were beginning to fear some harm had befallen you. I hope you are enjoying yourself.”

“Enjoying myself!” I exclaimed indignantly. “Do you think I am staying here, in this ridiculous position, and on this confounded stone, because I like it? Don’t you see that I am a prisoner?”

“A prisoner!”

“Yes, a prisoner. Look there in the water—at your side of the reef.”

“Caramba! Why, it is a cayman. How did he get there?”

“That I cannot tell you. My chief concern just now is how to get him away.”

“Oh, we will soon do that, Señor Doctor. Now, Pedro!”

And then they pelted the alligator with stones, cursed him in Spanish and Mayan, and shouted and yelled until I thought they would bring the roof of the cavern about our ears. But they might as well have tried to frighten an earthquake. The cayman did not even wink. He stuck to his post as grim as death, except for an occasional yawn, giving no sign of life.

“It is no use, Don Gomez,” I said; “you might as well whistle. Fetch my rifle, and shoot the beast.”

“That is no use either, Señor Doctor, his back is bullet-proof, and his belly is under water. I know of a surer way than that. Possess your soul in patience a

few minutes, and I'll fetch him. You stay here, Pedro, and keep the Señor Doctor company."

And with that Gomez whipped out of the cavern, running up the steps like a lamplighter. In ten minutes, which seemed like twenty, for I got colder and colder, and the stone did not get any smoother, he was back with something under his arm. Then he went to the far end of the *cenote*, and the next moment I heard the howl of anguish which a dog gives when you pinch his tail. The effect on the cayman was magical. With a hungry snap of his jaws, and a great sweep of his tail, he swerved right round and went full speed for the howl. There is nothing an alligator likes so well as dog.

"Now's your time, Señor Doctor!" shouted Gomez.

Before the words were out of his mouth I was in the water; and two minutes later I was safe on the other side, rubbing myself down with a rough towel.

"All right, Don Gomez! Has he got the dog?" I shouted.

"No, he has not, and I don't mean to let him, obstinate brute that he is. There, you have done your duty, go!" and the next moment the dog was running up the steps, faster, I should think, than he ever ran in all his life before.

As we went out of the cavern the cayman returned to his post before the gap, under the impression, probably, that, though he had been disappointed of his dog, there was still material in the *cenote* for a substantial meal—and there we left him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST ARROW.

“THERE, Señor Doctor, what think you of that?” exclaimed Don Gomez, reining in his mule. “Said I not rightly that Campeachy was a fine city; that you would like it much better than Merida?”

We were on the hill of San Francisco, the sun was sinking behind the sierras, and never did his rays gild a richer landscape or the glow of evening rest on a more charming picture. In front of us was a splendid panorama of white houses, cultivated fields, blooming gardens, and greenest verdure; while the walls and towers of the town stood out in strong relief, and were reflected in the azure waters of the Mexican Gulf. A fine city Campeachy is not, yet few cities are more picturesquely placed, and Nature has lavished on it some of her choicest gifts. The fibrous *cleomeæ* blooms in luxuriant hedges; the fragrant *arathemis* perfumes the beach; the *pitaya*, climbing the trunks of stately trees, suspends its flowers and fruit from their branches; the Mexican poppy hangs its golden petals in road and street, and gay *caballeros* and dark-eyed *señoritas* lounge and flirt in the orange groves that fringe the *alameda* of Santa Anna.

Yet Campeachy is not quite an earthly paradise ; good Americans would possibly give the palm to Paris ; and there are Englishmen who might prefer London, or even the Black Country, as a permanent place of abode. The climate is hot, and in the rainy season unhealthy ; yellow fever is not an infrequent visitor, and both town and country are infested by swarms of ferocious insects, which, under the combined influences of heat and moisture, multiply prodigiously. Cockroaches, scorpions, centipedes, and mosquitoes, are as thick as leaves in autumn—so numerous, indeed, as to render some parts of the coast positively uninhabitable.

Then the forests are thronged with *garrapatas*, horrible creatures, which bury head and claws so deeply under your skin as to make their extraction impossible without leaving behind some part of their bodies to fret and fester in your flesh. And if by good fortune you escape these tiny man-eaters, you may not improbably encounter the deadly *nahuyaca*, a poisonous snake whose bite, though almost invisible, is nearly always fatal. Its victims are said to sweat blood, and die in terrible agony.

Lovely to look at, Campeachy is about the last place in the world to live in.

But I had not come to study the natural history of the country, or its eligibility as a residence. I intended to make it the point of departure for my expedition. So far, I had been travelling luxuriously ; now I was about to plunge into the wilderness, and Campeachy was

the last place where I could obtain money and supplies, and, as I hoped, valuable information. I meant also, if possible, to enlist two or three trustworthy recruits; for I felt sure that if I took with me only Indians I should fail as utterly as Dominick had failed. The native whites were not much better; they have neither enterprise nor endurance. I could not rely on them in a fight; and, unless all my information was at fault, we should not reach the Phantom City without a good deal of fighting. Gomez was all right. I told him about my project as we came along, and he declared his determination to stand by me through thick and thin, happen what might.

"I have nothing but my life," he said, "and that is not worth much. I come of a race that never feared death, and I will go with you to this Phantom City, Señor Doctor, even though ten thousand Indian devils barred the way."

Bold words, but Spaniards are tall talkers by nature; the Don, however, was no coward.

I came by another recruit in a way equally welcome and unexpected. While calling upon a merchant, to whom I had letters of introduction from friends at Merida, I happened to mention that I was contemplating a journey into the unexplored interior, and should be glad if I could find a companion or two.

"I know just the man for you," said the merchant. "He is an American of the North, who has come here on business, and would like to see something more of

the country, if he can get anybody to go with him. I will bring you together."

And so he did. The moment I set eyes on the American of the North I liked him. A tall, big-boned, straight-backed man of about thirty, with a bronzed face, a short brown beard, hazel eyes, a pleasant smile, and the quiet, self-contained manner so characteristically American. The name on his card was "Austin B. Wildfell." He had come to Campeachy in connection with a "spec." in logwood, he said, and, being on the spot, he had rather a notion of exploring the country a bit, about which, as he understood, very little was known. Might he join my party?

"Certainly," I answered. And then I inquired if his object was curiosity—or something else.

"Both curiosity and something else, Dr. Carlyon. I like travelling in new countries, and I want to see what sort of woods this country grows, especially dye-woods, in which it is reported to be very rich. I guess, too, there is gold in it; and I should not much object to find a quarry of auriferous quartz or horn silver. A friend of mine found gold on the Rio Frio, but he was quite alone, and the Indians were too many for him."

On this I explained my object, told him all I knew about the Phantom City, and said, finally, that if he joined me I should expect him to go to the journey's end, the perils of which I fully disclosed.

"I'll go with you," he said quietly. "I'd like to see that city most particular. And, as for the danger,

I've faced worse enemies than naked Indians who fight with bows and arrows. I saw service in our war."

"Ah! it struck me you looked like an old soldier. In what capacity, might I ask?"

"Full private."

This increased my respect for Mr. Wildfell. I had met a good many Americans who had "served in our war," but none who acknowledged having held any lower rank than that of colonel or major. To have been a private in the Federal Army was a rare distinction, and I honoured my new friend accordingly.

But his business was not quite completed, and he could not leave Campeachy for a fortnight. I did not want to stay at Campeachy a fortnight; I wanted to be pushing on. This difficulty, after a short talk, was settled to our mutual satisfaction.

Until I met Mr. Wildfell I had not quite decided whether it would be better to make for Peten, as far as I could, by water, or go all the way overland. I wanted to explore the country in both directions; but, that being impossible, I proposed he should take the one route, I the other. I would start first, travel by Carmen and the Laguna de los Terminos, get as far as I could up the Usamacinta, and join him at Flores on the lake of Peten. If he left Campeachy ten days or a fortnight after me, taking the land trail all the way, we should probably arrive about the same time—the one who arrived first to wait for the other.

Wildfell agreed.

“Next Thursday week I shall set out for this Flores—Flowers does not it mean? And you may expect me when I get there, which will be as soon as I can. And, as you want another hand or two, I’ll see if I cannot bring somebody with me warranted to stand fire. Half a dozen of us, well armed, should walk through any amount of wild Indians.”

On this understanding I transferred my horse and the two mules to my new ally, and took passage for myself, Gomez, and Pedro, in a sailing-boat bound for Carmen. Before leaving Campeachy I got the Don a new suit of clothes, for the old ones had suffered so much from the journey that he had hardly a rag to his back. I also gave him a few dollars on account of his pay, and I was amused to notice that he at once provided himself with a fresh tooth-brush and a new banjo. I think he must have spent the balance in chocolates and cigarettes, for when not smoking the one he was drinking the other.

As we passed Champoton I happened to mention that it was a notable place in the history of the Conquest. The Spaniards landed there three times in twenty years, and were every time repulsed. In the first battle they were commanded by Cortez, and I was not surprised to learn that one of his companions was an ancestor of Don Gomez.

“Don Alonzo de la Plata was one of the great *conquistador’s* most valiant captains,” he observed, gravely. “He always said my ancestor was a host in himself.

If they had all been like him the battle of Carmen would have been a great victory."

"When did the battle of Carmen take place? I don't quite remember the date—do you, Don Gomez?"

"Certainly," answered my assistant, who never owned to ignorance. "Nine hundred and something. I cannot recall the odd figures. In ancient history, moreover, I always regard them as superfluous. It is quite enough to reckon by centuries."

"Nine hundred, Don Gomez! That is a very long time ago."

"It may seem so. But pray remember, Señor Doctor, that the De la Platas are one of the oldest families in Spain."

After this there was nothing more to be said. The antiquity of a man's family, one of whose ancestors fought under Cortez six hundred years before Cortez was born, and who counted time by centuries, was clearly beyond discussion.

The Usamacinta enters the Gulf of Mexico by several channels, the largest of which, the Rio Palizada, flows into the Lagoon of Terminos. The name (confines) is significant. When the Spanish navigators got there they thought they had reached the confines of the continent, and, though Cortez conquered Mexico, neither he nor his followers ever went much further on this side than Tobasco and the Tumbula mountains.

At the northern extremity of the lake lie the island and town of Carmen, where we exchange our

sailing-boat for a craft of smaller dimensions, known as a *cayuca*, which is simply the hollowed trunk of a tree, and begin our ascent of the great river. And a slow business it proves, the stream being too swift to admit of rowing; so there is nothing for it but pulling, with the help, when the wind is fair, of a sail.

We are now in the *tierra caliente*, and Nature reigns supreme. Great willows with trailing branches, gigantic bamboos, beautiful sedges, aquatic palm-trees with slender stems, beautiful sedges with trailing branches, bend over the fast-flowing and meandering river. The water swarms with fish. Birds of brilliant plumage perch on the boughs, and wing their flight over the tree-tops. The *aramus* delights the ear with his ringing voice; gorgeous butterflies and richly-hued humming-birds hover in the heated air; the falcon, uttering piercing shrieks, plunges suddenly into the water, soars skyward with his prey, and whirls higher and higher until he is lost to sight. But as if in rebuke of the vain theory that the world was created specially for man, here, where animal and vegetable life is so intense and abundant, the human race is unable to thrive—can hardly even exist. The air reeks with miasma; the winged fiends of the forest make life a torment and repose impossible. The few dwellers in this glorious garden of Nature are puny in body, poor in physique, and nerveless in spirit. Suffering from the most horrible skin diseases, disfigured by *goître* and elephantiasis, eaten up with jiggers,

tormented with boils, devoured by mosquitoes, and decimated by fevers, the wonder is that they do not all utterly perish.

I asked Don Gomez what he thought of the country.

"It is heaven to look at," he said, "but—something quite different to live in."

And most people, I think, would be disposed to concur in the Spaniard's verdict. Yet for all that I enjoyed my first experience of the Usamacinta. The scenery was so superb, the novelty so intense, the idea that I was travelling towards the Unknown—that every moment brought me nearer to that land of mystery which I had resolved either to see or die—all this so excited my imagination and occupied my thoughts, that I cared as little for the cockroaches that crawled over us by day as for the mosquitoes that preyed on us by night.

Noon was my time of repose. It was then, and only then, that the birds ceased their singing, that the myriad noises of the forest were hushed, the leaves drooped, and the breeze died away. Leaning back in the *cayuca*, under the shade of overhanging branches and bending flowers, I would lazily watch the trees and savannas float before my half-closed eyes, fancy for a moment that it was all an hallucination, and then drop off into a deep and dreamless slumber.

At length, after much labour and many days' pulling—for at night we always lay to and camped out—

we reached our destination, the rapids of the Usamacinta. Further we could not go, for several good and sufficient reasons: the rapids bar the river to navigation, unconquered Indians hold the country beyond, and it was at this point we had to begin our land journey to Flores, where I hoped to meet Wildfell. All the same, I resolved to go as far as possible, and with some difficulty prevailed on our boatmen to take me and Don Gomez to the foot of the rapids, where the Usamacinta, after cleaving a passage through the sierras, makes an abrupt bend. At a point where all issue seems closed, and the stream looks as if it were pouring out of the mountain side, a sudden turn reveals the gap towards which it is rolling in a sheet of white foam from the heights above. The farther we go the narrower becomes the stream. Imprisoned between tall grey rocks, rising sheer from the water's edge, it reminded me of the grand scene near the Fort de l'Écluse, where the "arrowy Rhone" rushes through the gorges of Savoy towards the plains of France.

I wanted to go still farther, for as yet we were in comparatively smooth water, and I was urging the men to increased exertion, when I heard a shout of fear, the *cayuca* whirled suddenly round, and I narrowly escaped being thrown into the water.

An arrow, shot by an invisible hand, had grazed the steersman's arm, and was quivering in the side of the boat.

After this it would have been impossible, even if

it had been wise, to push on ; so I told the men to take us back to the little bay where we had left Pedro and our baggage, and where I meant to pass the night.

As I lay in my hammock, under the branches of a mighty tree—the rush of the river, the howling of monkeys, and the cries of night birds in my ears—I pondered long and deeply over the incident which had just come to pass. The Lacandones, or Manches, or Tolishes, or whoever they might be, evidently guarded well this avenue into their domain. It was clearly impossible to attain my object by sailing up the Usamacinta. And yet I had every reason to believe that on or near this stream, or one of its affluents, the Phantom City must be sought.

CHAPTER VIII.

MY NEW RECRUITS.

AT a village near the falls I succeeded in hiring, not without difficulty, two horses and two mules for the journey to Peten. The horses were for Don Gomez and myself, the mules for the baggage, the amount of which I had increased both at Campeachy and Carmen. Pedro preferred to walk. I also engaged three *arrieros*, or muleteers—lithe little fellows, as hardy as alligators and as active as cats.

We were now at the foot of the sierras, and in a much less relaxing climate than that of the humid plains of Tobasco—a fact to which the improved condition of the natives was no doubt due. Yet the vegetation was as luxuriant as ever, and I found riding anything but a delight. Travellers being few and far between, the tracks they made were speedily obliterated. Even a macadamised street, if left to itself, would soon be overgrown, and a mere path through the forest disappears in a few weeks. Wayfarers in these wilds must be prepared to act on occasion as their own roadmakers, and my *arrieros* had often to go on before, literally hewing a path with their *machetes*. As for the horses—bits being unknown in this part of Central America—they went

pretty much as they chose, naturally taking the path they liked best, without regard for the convenience of their riders, heedless alike of projecting branches, which threatened us with the fate of Absalom, and of the sharp-thorned briars which tear the flesh like iron hooks. We had to be continually on the watch, and dodge these dangers as best we could, now dropping our heads below the horses' necks, now leaning back on the cruppers, sometimes even slipping off behind.

After we had been *en route* a few days, Gomez observed that he had become so accomplished a horseman that he thought, when he got back to Spain, he should join a circus.

"A De la Plata join a circus!"

"You forget, Señor Doctor," he answered with great dignity, "you forget that while a De la Plata can never degrade himself by honest work, he always adds lustre to any profession which it may please him to adopt."

Considering the character of the country, and the difficulties of the way, we probably got on as well as could be expected; but it was thirteen days after leaving the rapids of the Usamacinta before we reached the first village in the district of Peten. Late one sunny afternoon we emerged from the forest, and found ourselves close to an azure lake, in the middle of which a small picturesque island rose in a gentle ascent from the water's edge. Its summit was crowned with a church and a grove of cocoa-trees, and along the

shore and on the hill-side clustered public buildings and private dwellings, most of the latter of a very poor sort, but probably quite sufficient for the modest needs of the inhabitants and the exigencies of the climate.

The lake was Itza, the village, Flores, where I had agreed to meet Wildfell, and quite expected to find him. I lost no time in seeking out the *corregidor* of the place, and inquiring if any strangers had arrived from the coast during the last few days.

“Certainly not, nor during the last few weeks, nor, I might truthfully say, during the last few months. Strangers seldom honour us with their presence here at Flores, Señor Don.”

This was not pleasant news. More than a month had passed since I left Campeachy, and I began to fear that Wildfell had either changed his mind or lost his way. But as he might not have been able to start as soon as he anticipated, and his help would be invaluable, I decided to wait for him until his coming was past hoping for.

The *corregidor*—a fat, smiling, genial, and slightly pompous old gentleman—treated me with the most distinguished consideration, found me lodgings, and, in the old Spanish fashion, placed himself and everything he had at my disposal. His local pride was gratified by my visit, which it pleased him to think was due entirely to the attractions of Peten; and when I mentioned that I expected every moment the arrival of an

American *del Norte*, from Campeachy, the old fellow was quite in ecstasies.

“I will have a look-out kept for him,” he exclaimed. “Your friend shall be received with every honour due to so distinguished a visitor. I regret infinitely, Señor Don Carlyon, that, owing to my not being informed of your approach, I was unable to give you the reception which, in view of the friendly relations existing between our respective countries and my position as *corregidor* of the district, you had a right to expect. *Hagame Usted el favor* (do me the extreme favour) to accept the will for the deed.”

Which I did, of course, with many thanks for the honour I had missed and the hospitality I had received.

The old man was as good as his word. Every morning he sent out an Indian runner on the trail by which Wildfell was expected to come, with orders to return full speed whenever he caught sight of an *estranero*. On the third day after my arrival I was roused from my usual siesta by the *corregidor* himself, who told me, with many expressions of satisfaction, that the runner had just come in with the news that a party of horsemen and *arrieros* were crossing the savannas, a few miles from Flores, and at the rate they were travelling would probably arrive in an hour.

“They are doubtless your friends the *Americanos del Norte*,” he added.

“Not a doubt of it,” I answered, wondering how many recruits Wildfell was bringing me. “If you will

have the goodness to get me a horse I will go and meet them."

"With infinite pleasure, Señor Don Doctor, and I, on my part, will prepare for them a fitting reception."

The steed was brought. I crossed the lake in a boat, and set out to meet the travellers, who I tried to feel sure were Wildfell and his people. Yet they might not be, and I prepared myself for a possible disappointment. But I had not gone far when my doubts disappeared. That tall man on the little horse could be none other than the American. Who the others were I could form no idea. There seemed to be at least half-a-dozen mounted men, and twice as many *arrieros* on foot.

"Well, we are here at last," exclaimed Wildfell, reining up and giving me his hand. "I suppose this is Flores? Anyhow, judging from the quantity of flowers, it ought to be. Why, the savannas down below there are carpeted with them. And don't they smell sweet! This beats a scent-store any day."

"That's vanilla. Those are vanilla beans lying about there. I hope you have had a pleasant journey?"

"Well, I cannot say that we have. What with chopping down trees, jumping over logs, scrambling through bramble-bushes, climbing up precipices, slipping down mountains, and rafting over rivers, and one thing and another, it is about the unpleasantest journey I ever undertook. We've had a shocking bad time,

that's a fact. Why, we had to wait in one place nearly a week before we could get over a river! It was too deep for fording and too swift for swimming or rafting. If it had not gone down we should have been there yet. I'll tell you what it is, Doctor Carlyon: if the country before us is as primeval as that behind us, we shall be as long in reaching this Phantom City of yours as the Children of Israel were in reaching the Promised Land. However, in for a penny in for a pound. I said I would go with you, and go I will. But let me introduce you to my friend Mr. Ferdinando. He means to go too, and I am sure will prove a valuable ally.

Here Mr. Ferdinando and I shook hands, and said how delighted we were to make each other's acquaintance. He was almost as big a man as Wildfell himself; middle-aged, swart-skinned, and black-eyed, and but for an ugly scar which stretched from the root of his nose to the corner of his mouth, a face pitted with small-pox, and a something peculiar about one of his eyes, he might have been not ill-looking. I learnt afterwards, as I supposed at the time, that the peculiarity arose from the eye in question being of glass; and when Mr. Ferdinando raised his hat it was evident that he wore a wig. But the sparseness of hair upon his skull was much more than atoned for by the quantity that adorned his chin and cheeks. His moustaches were of portentous length, and a cascade of black beard fell nearly to his waist.

Altogether Mr. Ferdinando was a gentleman of very *distingué* appearance.

"I picked him up at Campeachy after you left," continued Wildfell, *sotto voce*, as we rode side by side towards Flores. "His name sounds Spanish, and his looks are foreign ; but he is an American citizen, raised in the state of Florida, and just the man you want. Seen a good deal of Indian fighting, served in the Seminole war—that is where he got that scratch on his face—and in spite of his game eye, he could shoot an apple off your head at a hundred yards."

"I should not like to let him try. What was the inducement?"

"For him to join us, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Fifty dollars down, and a promise of more when the business is put through. Not much, seeing that he has to risk his life. But he is a born adventurer, and has an idea that, even if we don't reach the Phantom City, we shall have a good time. He thinks there is no end of gold in the country."

"And who are those two fellows on the mules?"

"Guatemala mestizos (half-breeds). They say they served with General Mendoza in the last civil war, and know the Indian country. They are likely chaps, and I dare say will go with us. Both are called José (pronounced Ho-say), so, to prevent confusion, I have christened one Boss and the other Hoss. Him with the squint is Hoss; and you can always tell Boss by his

being short of an ear—he lost it in a rough-and-tumble with a jaguar.”

I began to think that Mr. Wildfell had brought me some queer recruits, and I asked myself, not without misgiving, what the Children of Light would think of them.

By the time we reached the lake the entire population of the village had assembled on the shore. And very picturesque they looked, especially the girls, some of whom, despite the duskiness of their complexions, were really good-looking; and all having fine flashing black eyes and shapely forms, none could be called ugly. A chemise of thin cotton stuff, trimmed with lace, and a simple muslin skirt of some bright colour, constitute the rather scanty, yet graceful, costume of a Flores *señorita*. The hair, always luxuriant and beautiful, and plaited with gay ribbons, hangs down the back. A crescent-shaped comb glitters on the top of the head, and a necklace of pearls and small gold coin completes the adornment of the dark-eyed daughters of Peten.

The men—armed to the teeth in honour of the occasion, with pistols and carbines of ancient date—though wearing only trousers and shirts and broad-brimmed sombreros, looked also picturesque and slightly savage.

The *corregidor* was a sight to see. His white trousers, which seemed to have shrunk in the washing, left uncovered several inches of a pair of fat and hairy legs, stockings being unknown luxuries in the district

of Peten. Vest he had none, but he had contrived to struggle into an old, richly-laced, and profusely brass-buttoned uniform coat a world too little for him; on his head was a cocked hat of the fashion of the last century, and he had girded him with a sword big enough to have been wielded by the immortal Cortez at the battle of Champoton.

After making a little high-flown speech, in which he expressed his deep sense of the honour of our visit, and the hope that our respective countries would remain at peace for all time, the *corregidor* rather startled us by calling out "Fire!" Whereupon the men discharged their muskets, and a youth, whom we had not previously noticed, began to beat a big drum with a vigour that elicited general applause.

"Well," said Wildfell, "I've seen a good many things; but this is the first time I've seen a drummer with nothing in the world on but his drum and a straw hat."

It was true; the youth had nothing else on.

"But I say," he added as the performer turned round, "this won't do at all, you know. It isn't decent. He should have a drum on behind as well. Just suggest that to the *corregidor*, will you? But perhaps you had better not. He means no ill, and it might perhaps hurt his feelings."

I thought so too, and as nearly all the lads in the place were attired with equal simplicity, barring the drum, I am afraid that even had the suggestion been made it would not have led to any practical result.

In the evening the *corregidor* gave a *tertulia*, which proved to be a delightful evening entertainment. The ladies sang charming little songs to their own accompaniment on the guitar. Then the *marimbas* struck up, and the fun began in real earnest. Our host insisted that Wildfell and myself should "tread a measure," and provided us with two lovely little partners, and we found ourselves dancing a fandango before we knew what we were about. Then rum was served round, the *señoritas* sipping it with as much unconcern as English ladies sip champagne at an evening party.

The men more than sipped, and I fear our friend the *corregidor* drank more than was good for him. At any rate he had a terrible headache next morning, and I gave him an effervescing draught, for which he was so grateful that he offered, if I would consent to stay at Flores for good, to adopt me as his son and make me his heir.

CHAPTER IX.

OVER THE MOUNTAINS.

THREE days later we set out. Besides Wildfell, his three recruits, Don Gomez, and Pedro, I had six *arrieros*, whom I intended to take with me as far as they were willing to go and it was possible for the horses and mules to travel. I did not disclose, even to the *corregidor*, the object of our journey, merely saying that we were going further into the interior; but he took our parting so much to heart that I promised, if it were possible, to look him up on my way back, and, having more dollars and doubloons with me than I was likely to require, I left part of them in his hands, asking him, if he did not hear from me within a year and a day, to remit the amount to my bankers in Merida.

He seemed to consider this an excellent joke, and regarded it as a pledge of our speedy return.

"I shall see you again in three months," he said, as we shook hands at parting.

I smiled incredulously, for, whatever else might befall me, I felt sure that I should never see Flores again.

My objective point was the region between the rivers Usamacinta and Lacandone, for there, I thought, I was most likely to find the Phantom City. But, as

the maps of this part of the country are purely conjectural, and I knew nothing of its physical characteristics, I should, in a great measure, have to grope my way and leave much to Providence. I only knew that if I bore sou'-west by south, and crossed the Cordilleras, which stretch in an irregular line from the confines of British Honduras to the ruins of Palenque, I should be sure, sooner or later, to strike the great river. I intended to follow the regular tracks, such as they were, as long as I could. After that, we should have to direct our course by the compass; and, as I had brought with me a snuffbox sextant, a first-class chronometer watch, and a nautical almanack, I could always, by taking lunar and solar observations, ascertain our position within a mile or two.

Nothing could well be more agreeable than the first part of our new journey. The country was elevated and undulating, the track broad and firm; blue hills were visible in the distance; instead of struggling through the dense forests of the *tierra caliente*, we rode gaily through groves of park-like trees, thronged with birds, and over ground enamelled with richly-hued sweet-smelling flowers. We generally passed the night at some hacienda, where we were always warmly welcomed, or in the neighbourhood of a village where we could obtain such supplies as we required. At other times we slung our hammocks on the branches of a tree, and slept *à la belle étoile*. Faisans (not pheasants), deer, wild pig, and monkeys, being plentiful, we had no difficulty in

replenishing our larder, and bananas and yams seldom failing, we fared sumptuously every day; while living continually in the open air, and, being ever on the move, we were all in splendid health and exuberant spirits.

It was only when we reached the foot of the Cordilleras that our difficulties began. No more haciendas, no more villages, and as neither guides nor information were obtainable—for the region we were now in was unpeopled and had never been explored—we had to find our way as best we could; now cutting a path through dense jungle, now going miles round to avoid a barranca, or dragging our four-footed companions up some stony ravine. At last we had to leave them behind, for, clever as Central American horses and mules are, they cannot climb perpendicular heights. So we sent them and the *arrieros* back, all save two of the latter, whom I persuaded to go with us. I did not expect them to fight much, if it came to that; but we had a good many things to carry: hammocks, *patates* (a sort of mat which serves the double purpose of an umbrella and a shelter tent), changes of clothing, arms and ammunition, and a supply of food—for we could not count on always finding a sufficiency of game—and without their help we should have been decidedly overweighted. Yet I bitterly regretted afterwards that we did take them. The others were all volunteers, but these poor little tame Indians, as Wildfell called them, went reluctantly, induced by promises of a reward which they were destined never to receive.

Pedro proved a perfect treasure. He became much attached to me, and, though I offered him the chance, he positively refused to return with the *arrieros*. He had spent all his life in the forest, was as keen of vision as a hawk, could read signs, and knew where to look for water, fruit trees, and edible roots. No journey was too long for him, no burden too heavy, and, though he knew nothing of the country we were in, he had picked up odds and ends of information about the wild Indians which I found very useful. He told me, among other things, that the use of poisoned arrows was confined to the Lacandones on the lower Usamacinta; and that the Choles, with whom we should most probably come first in contact, fought in the fashion of their forefathers, with huge bows and ordinary arrows, shields, spears, and large wooden swords edged with flints. They might have a few guns, captured in forays, or obtained from Christianised Indians, but, in the absence of a regular supply of powder, these weapons could not be of much use to them. Armed as we were we should be more than a match for any wandering parties of braves we might casually meet, and, unless our presence in the country became known through our own imprudence, we could not well be taken unawares. Except in overwhelming numbers, the aborigines were not likely to face us in open fight. Surprise was our greatest danger. It behoved us, therefore, to take every precaution, keep a sharp look-out, kindle no fires save in places where the smoke could not be seen make no more noise than

we could help, and if we saw any Indian sign turn another way.

I left the reading of signs to Pedro; but I did not fail to impress on my companions the necessity of following his advice—whatever we might think about his facts. As to this all agreed, and for a while were as cautious as I could desire; but as time went on and we saw neither Indians, nor signs of any, caution was gradually relaxed.

Ferdinando and the mestizos gave me much trouble and anxiety. They evidently thought that the Phantom City was a mere pretext, and that my real object was to look for gold. Ferdinando, having been a digger in California, possessed some knowledge of mining, and whenever we made a halt he would go off on a private exploring expedition of his own, taking with him Hoss and Boss, who would fire their rifles, whatever I said, thereby adding to our risk and wasting ammunition which we had no means of replacing. Yet I could not be very severe with them, for the journey over the Cordilleras was extremely trying, and it was as much as I could do to keep up their courage and persuade them to go on. We had to crawl up gullies on our hands and knees, and make Pedro and the *arrieros* climb rocks, monkey fashion, and help us up afterwards with ropes. We had often to retrace our steps for miles, and travel days together without advancing a mile, in order to double some impassable barranca or avoid some unfordable mountain stream.

Game failed us too, and if it had not been for the *toto-poste*—roasted maize paste—which at Pedro's suggestion we had brought with us, we should have been in very evil case—perhaps have perished miserably of hunger. It is not very luxurious food this *toto-poste*—it lacks variety; yet Indians, when on a journey, eat little else, and, as it is easily carried and eminently nutritious, I do not think we could have taken anything more suitable. But it was a great change from *faisan* and monkey, and Ferdinando and Hoss and Boss grumbled continually, and became very discontented. If it had not been for fear of losing their way and coming to grief, I feel sure they would have deserted us. Wildfell, on the other hand, took everything with philosophical indifference, never allowing himself to be either flurried or put out of temper; and Gomez, besides being naturally high-spirited, was too proud to complain. Often of an evening, when we were lying in our hammocks or stretched on the ground, he would play an air on his banjo and sing us some of his Spanish love-songs. The music was not of a very high quality perhaps, but it pleased the *arrieros* and Hoss and Boss immensely, and helped to pass the time when we were too weary to talk and too tired to sleep.

At length, after many disappointments—for we had several times reached heights which seemed the loftiest, only to find, when we got thither, that there were others still higher—we won the topmost point of the Cordilleras, and began to go downhill. It was easier, though

not much, than going up; but the country improved as we descended, and as we bagged a deer and a few head of game our spirits improved considerably, and we began to speculate as to what we should find further on.

Still no Choles, nor sign of them, nor of any human presence whatsoever.

“I’ll tell you what it is, Doctor Carlyon,” said Wildfell one day about this time, “I begin to think those Indians are humbugs. We are like Robinson Crusoe, lords of all we survey.”

I began to think so too, and though Pedro shook his head and looked grave, we grew very careless—laughed and shouted, and shot, and cooked our game at big fires, as if we knew for a fact that there were no Indians within a hundred miles of us.

Yet there were certain precautions which we did not relax, and which became a part of the daily routine of our lives. We never camped at night or rested during the day until Pedro had carefully surveyed the ground and pronounced it safe and free from “sign.” When we were on the march he and the *arrieros* went always some score or two yards ahead, keeping a sharp look-out for any traces that might indicate the vicinity of Indians or other dangerous animals. Next came Wildfell and myself, loaded rifles slung over our shoulders, and *machetes* by our side. Then followed Hoss and Boss, similarly armed, Ferdinando and Gomez bringing up the rear. This order was necessarily varied according to the character of the country. In

many places we had to march in single file, but we kept to it as far as possible. Each man, moreover, had his appointed duty in the preparation of our bivouacs, and each carried a pack, but the bulk of our belongings was borne on the shoulders of Pedro and the *arrieros*.

We must have presented a strange spectacle—or should have done, if there had been anybody to look at us—the three stout heavily-laden little Indians in front, naked to the waist, missing nothing within the range of their vision, often, with *machetes* in hand, cutting away vines, thorns, and other impediments to locomotion, as they walked; we four whites, all tall men, our faces burnt black-red, scarred with wounds from the prickly *bejucos*, and swollen with mosquito bites, wearing red flannel shirts, broad-brimmed straw hats, and ragged trousers the colour of which was generally that of the ground we were travelling over, and the two mestizos, undersized and ill-favoured, similarly attired, but perhaps slightly more ragged. As Wildfell said, our own mothers would not have known us.

We had descended, perhaps, two thousand feet from the summit of the Cordilleras, and were marching somewhat in the order described, in fairly open ground—although, owing to the bigness of the trees, we could not see far ahead—when Pedro stopped suddenly short, and, uttering an exclamation, ran hastily forward, then stopped again.

“Mira! mira, señores!” he shouted, evidently in a state of great excitement.

In a moment we were by his side.

"By Jove, Carlyon, there's your Phantom City at last!" exclaimed Wildfell.

We were on the edge of a precipice. Below us stretched a thickly-wooded valley in the very heart of the mountains, cleft by a brawling stream which descended in a sheet of foam from one of the neighbouring hills. In the midst of this amphitheatre uprose a great mass of buildings, on which the setting sun poured a flood of silvery light.

I stood like one entranced. Could it indeed be the Phantom City? My heart beat wildly, and my emotion was so great that I could hardly adjust the field-glass, which I kept always at hand.

The others, gazing alternately at me and the buildings, awaited my verdict with an emotion hardly less than my own.

I took a long look; then removed the glass from my eyes, and looked again.

"Ruins! nothing but ruins!" and as I spoke my heart sank, and every countenance around me fell.

I saw shattered columns and broken pyramids, vast buildings, magnificent even in decay, grander and more extensive, as it seemed to me, than all the temples and palaces of Uxmal and Aké and Chichen-Itza put together; but all in ruins, and not one sign of life.

"What an awful sell!" said Wildfell, dolefully.

"Not at all," I answered, with affected cheerfulness, and trying to make the best of it. "A slight

disappointment, perhaps; but even in disappointment there is encouragement. That valley was once inhabited—the home of a civilised community. Those buildings were never raised by savages. The Phantom City cannot be far off. Next to discovering it, this find is the best thing that could have happened.”

“There should be treasure in those ruins,” put in Ferdinando, eagerly. “I’ll be bound they have never been explored. Shall we make for them at once?”

“No,” I said, coldly; “it is too late, they are further off than they look, and there may be Indians there, though I cannot see them. We must wait until morning, and go to work very cautiously, or we shall, may-be, fall into a trap.”

So, after Pedro and the *arrieros* had surveyed the ground, we chose a site for our bivouac, unpacked, lighted a fire in a secluded spot, and made our preparations for the night.

As the sun went down I took “a departure,” and, when the moon rose, “a lunar,” in order to determine our position, which I marked on the map I had brought with me. I also took the bearings of the ruins, as once in the valley we should be unable to see over the tree-tops, and might easily, going by the light of Nature, even with the help of Pedro’s woodcraft, make a bad shot.

CHAPTER X.

LOST.

It took us some time to find a way down the precipice, but, this part of our task accomplished, we had little difficulty in reaching the ruins. The trees, though of tremendous height, were not very close together; and from their appearance and the character of the flora, the frequency of artificial mounds, and other indications, I felt certain that we were not in a primeval forest—that the valley had once been cleared and cultivated.

We went forward with extreme caution, Pedro and the *arrieros* in front, as usual, the rest of us following, with our rifles loaded and unslung, ready for any emergency that might arise. But nothing happened. Pedro, quest as he might, could detect no suspicious sign: the place was as deserted as it looked.

The ruins stood on a mound, whether wholly natural or artificial it was impossible to say, and were reached by an immense flight of steps, at least fifty yards long. Mounting these with some difficulty—for they were broken and covered with vegetation—we found ourselves on a vast platform or terrace, on which stood a long range of shattered and dismantled, yet still gigantic, columns, once, probably, the supports of some cyclopean

temple or palace. Further on were great houses with roofs still almost intact, flowers and plants growing all over them, the walls outside richly carved and ornamented with human figures, and inside bearing traces of mural paintings and hieroglyphic inscriptions. The biggest building of all covered, as I calculated, an area of more than four thousand square yards; there was a square pyramidal tower, some forty feet high, out of which grew a huge tree at least a hundred feet higher; and as the ruins spread far into the forest, we were evidently on the site of a once-extensive town, which had possibly been the capital of a populous and powerful state.

“Gad!” exclaimed Wildfell, “this may be the Phantom City after all. It looks ghostly enough for anything.”

The same thought had struck me. Was it not conceivable that the legend might have survived, though the city had perished; and that Dominick’s *cura* and others, catching a glimpse of these ruins from the highest of yonder mountains, had created the shining walls, the lake, the island, and the cultivated fields, by the force of their own imaginations?

“I do not think so,” was my answer, after a moment’s reflection. “This place has been dead and buried, hidden from human ken, for centuries. The legend, however old, still lives, and is always receiving new confirmation. The tame Indians believe in it most devoutly—ask Pedro and the *arrieros*—and they are

always more or less in communication with their unconquered brethren. The legend relates to an existing, inhabited, aboriginal city, which this is certainly not."

"Carried unanimously. You talk like a book, Doctor. You are for going further, then?"

"Undoubtedly. We are a long way from the Phantom City yet, I fear."

"So do I," returned Wildfell, grimly; "a very long way. However, let it be as you say. But had we not better stop here a day or two? It seems to be a nice quiet place; we stand in need of rest, and it will be quite a novelty to sleep with a roof over our heads."

"By all means. Pedro and the *arrieros* shall clear out a corner of the palace, and we will sling our hammocks there, and make ourselves as comfortable as circumstances will permit."

After giving Pedro his instructions we continued our ramble about the ruins, then went to the stream we had seen from above—which once on a time must have washed the city walls—had a bathe, and came back greatly refreshed.

The Indians had done their work well—lighted a fire, improvised a table, fitted up our hammocks, and, last but not least, found some bananas and yams, and, as Ferdinando was lucky enough to kill a buck close to the ruins, we had an unusually luxurious supper.

But neither the Indians nor the mestizos would on any account consent to sleep in the ruins, which, they said, were sure to be haunted, like all such places, by

the spirits of their former inhabitants, and all except Pedro, whom I persuaded to stay with us, slung their hammocks outside, under the trees.

Night brought with it the explanation of these superstitious fears. I no longer wondered that the ruins were deserted, and that the Indians refused to remain within their walls after sunset. I experienced a few qualms myself ; so, I believe, did Wildfell ; and, judging by Gomez's invocations of his patron saint and Ferdinando's oaths, our companions must have been in a state of mortal terror. As for Pedro, he stayed where he was, simply because he was too frightened even to run away.

The palace appeared to be enchanted. As the moonbeams struggled faintly through the crevices in the walls, the broken vine-covered columns took all sorts of weird and fantastic shapes ; tiny winged lamps seemed to float in the air, first like fiery sparks, then with a fugitive brightness which lost itself in a train of light. At the same time, undefinable sounds proceeded from all parts of the wood—not awesome like the cries of nocturnal birds and the roar of wild beasts, but soft and sweet like the warbling of birds, and as melodious and mysterious as the music of a heavenly choir. But almost every moment the sounds varied. Now they were as the tinklings of a silver bell or a plaintive voice calling in the distance, then as the rustling of leaves in a rising storm, next as sighs or sobs that seemed to come from the roof of the palace. Again,

they were like a thousand gentle whisperings, a thousand little cadences, as if the genii of the ruins, or the spirits of their former possessors, were chanting songs of praise and celebrating in a universal concert the wonders of Nature and the magnificence of the night.

But no harm came of it all; none of the unseen songsters gave other token of their presence; the sounds which at first so much alarmed lulled us at last to sleep, and when we awoke in the morning all was bright and cheerful. The old palace was flooded with sunshine, humming-birds flew among the vines and circled round the columns, green and purple dragon-flies darted about in rapid and capricious flight, the woodpecker began his ringing strokes on the trunks of decaying trees, and the whole forest became full of the sights and sounds of life and motion.

“What do you think of it all—queer, wasn’t it?” said the American, as he rolled lazily out of his hammock. “Weren’t you scared? I know I was, at first. Who are they—those musicians, I mean? And what could those lights be?”

“Well, I am by no means sure. But if you ask my candid opinion, I should say that the lights were fire-flies, and the singers either frogs or pigeons, or both.”

“Come, now, that won’t wash. Frogs can sing, I know, but they cannot make such a heavenly concert as we heard last night. Say you don’t know, like a man.”

“Well, if it was not frogs, I don’t know.”

This closed the discussion for the time, and though

it was re-opened afterwards, and we listened and watched night after night, we never succeeded in clearing up the mystery.

While Wildfell and I explored the ruins, or rambled in the forest, Ferdinando and the mestizos were hunting after hidden treasure, and to my great surprise they made a big find. By clearing away a quantity of rubbish they uncovered the entrance to the vaults underneath the palace, where they discovered a sort of cave or grotto, which seemed to have been the strong room of its previous owners. It contained nothing in the shape of coin, but was literally full of gold and silver vessels and ornaments, gold-hilted swords, golden helmets, and pates of the precious metals, which appeared to have formed part of suits of armour.

The excitement produced by this discovery, though natural, was unfortunate. All, even Wildfell, were eager to make further explorations, and set to work digging and searching with as much energy as if there were a mint hard by where they could convert their finds into current coin without trouble, and a bank in which they could lodge the proceeds to their credit.

"What will you do with these things?" I asked. "You cannot take them with you."

"We will try," said Ferdinando. "We can each carry something, and it is worth a little trouble to be rich for life."

Argument was useless, nobody would listen to me. Except Pedro, who looked very grave, and said that if

we stayed much longer the Choles would certainly be upon us, everybody seemed to have gone mad. They were grubbing (with sticks and rudely-fashioned wooden spades) and scratching and rooting about the ruins from morning till night. I spoke of danger, urged the object of our expedition ; I begged of them to pack up all the gold they thought they could carry, and let us be gone.

I might as well have spoken to the wind. For all that appeared to the contrary, they had resolved to stay where they were for the term of their natural lives, and I was beginning to think that I should have to go in search of the Phantom City alone, when an incident occurred that left me no option.

As it happens, I am somewhat of an ornithologist, and I had long been trying to "spot," and, if possible, capture a bird whose richly musical notes were always heard at daybreak—seldom at any other time—when one morning, on rising from my hammock, and strolling into the forest, I thought I saw him on the branch of a tree. After listening a few minutes, to make sure that it was the one I wanted, I fetched my gun. When I got back the bird had flown, but as I could still hear him I followed in the direction of the sound, and as often as he changed his position I kept on following, in my eagerness taking little heed which way I went. In the end, after an hour's chase, I lost him, and being reminded by certain internal sensations that I had not broken my fast, I turned round, and shaped my course, as I supposed, for the ruins.

But though I walked rapidly I seemed to get no nearer, and when, on looking at my watch, I found that a full hour had passed since I lost the bird, and yet could see no sign of the ruins, I knew that I had missed my way—that I was lost in the forest. I noticed, too, that the character of the ground was more broken, the vegetation different from any I had seen before. The wood was free from undergrowth, too, and immense trees with pyramidal trunks overshadowed a multitude of brilliant-berried-coffee trees, relics of former cultivation, which I saw now for the first time.

Yes, I was lost! There could be no mistake about it. My first impulse was to curse my own folly and imprudence. It was the first time I had ventured far into the forest without either blazing trees as a guide to my way back, or observing, by my compass, the direction I was taking. True, I had my compass in my pocket, but as I had not gone straight—might, for anything I knew, have made a complete circuit—it was of no use. Whether I went forward or backward, east, west, north, or south, I might be equally wrong.

What was to be done?

After some thought I decided to climb a tree and try if I could not get a sight of the ruins. I acted on the idea at once—climbed one of the tallest, a very monarch of the forest, fully a hundred and fifty feet high, if it was a yard. All I could see was an ocean of verdure which stretched to the horizon, and seemed limitless. Yet the ruins, hidden as they were in the wood, might

be no more than a mile away! To see them I should have to mount five times as high. But not having wings this was out of the question.

What should I do next? How extricate myself from the scrape into which my heedlessness had brought me?

The worst thing I could do was to get frightened, lose my presence of mind, and act at random. Whatever befell I must keep cool. So I descended the tree, sat me down at the foot of it, took out my pipe and had a smoke. By the time it was finished I had resolved on a fixed plan of action, which I proceeded to put into immediate execution.

I selected the spot where I was as a point of departure—the centre of a circle as it were—marked it by slicing with my *machete* the bark of the big tree and piling at its base a heap of stones. As I had only been walking two hours I could not be more than that distance from the ruins at the outside. Hence, if I walked two hours towards every cardinal point in turn, I should be sure to strike the ruins sooner or later; for they were so extensive and so near that it would not be necessary to attempt the impossible feat of doing every point of the compass. To do even the four points, reckoning them at four hours apiece (going and returning), and one at two, would occupy me fully fourteen hours, if I never rested a moment, by which time it would be long past dark. On the other hand, it was quite possible that I might succeed at the first or second

attempt, to say nothing of the likelihood that Pedro or some of the others would come to look for me, in which event, even though I should not see them, their shouts would give me a clue to their whereabouts.

So after plucking and eating a few bananas, which by reason of their succulence are both food and drink, I started on my first trip, walking due south, and "blazing" a tree every two or three yards as I went along. No sign of the palace was visible in that direction, and when I got back to my point of departure it had gone two o'clock. But as I had not expected anything better, I was not much disappointed, and began my second journey in good spirits, walking fast, so that if I failed again I might be back at my starting-place before dark.

I did fail again, and ten minutes after I reached the big tree daylight disappeared as suddenly as if a veil had been dropped between earth and sun.

I lay down on the ground, utterly exhausted, for the day had been exceedingly hot, and bananas, though refreshing, are not very nutritious. There was nothing for it but to stay where I was, as walking about in the forest when I could not see my hand, much less my compass, would have been sheer insanity. I knew that between one and two there would be a full moon, when I might see my way and try east and west, as I had already tried north and south.

After listening a few minutes, as I had frequently done during the day, for the possible shouts of my com-

panions, I fell fast asleep, despite my efforts to keep awake; for it is not exactly a prudent proceeding to sleep after dark in a wood haunted by wild animals, both creeping and four-footed.

I awoke with a start and a sense of indescribable terror. The forest was filled with strange and unearthly noises—some like those I had heard in the ruins, others still more weird and terrifying. Now a soft and gentle cooing, drowned the next minute by long yells of anguish, as if somewhere in the depths of the forest lost souls were suffering the tortures of the damned; then a momentary silence broken by the fierce roar of jaguar or puma, and followed by the dismal screech of some nocturnal bird of prey.

I struck a light and looked at my watch. As the match flared up for a second I saw a huge frog, as big as a kitten, staring at me with stolid eyes, and a deadly *nahayuca* glided past my feet and disappeared in the darkness.

I had still two hours to pass in this pandemonium!

Poets prate of the ecstasy of being alone with Nature. Let them try a forest on the Cordilleras of Guatemala after dark, and see how they like that!

It was not the first night by a good many that I had passed in a forest, but it was the first I had passed alone and without fire. I had never before felt so completely cut off from my kind, so utterly lonesome and helpless and—there is no use denying it—so much afraid. Though in one sense free as the air, I was held by

invisible fetters, and as much a prisoner as if I had been buried deep in one of the dungeons kept by the Russian Czar for the entertainment of his loving subjects. The darkness was so dense that I could not walk five yards without risk of running foul of some obstacle, tripping over a tree-root, or setting my foot on a venomous snake. There was danger even in stretching out my hand, and I might any moment be pounced on by a jaguar or attacked by a drove of the fierce wild peccaries of the woods.

But two hours are not an eternity. The moon rose at last, pouring into the glade a flood of golden light, only inferior to that of day, and with a sense of thankfulness and relief too deep for words I got up, stretched my stiffened limbs, and started straightway on my third journey in search of the ruins—making this time for the east.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONE.

"AT last! thank Heaven, at last!" I shouted, as, after an hour's swift walking, I saw before me one of the mounds I had noticed on our arrival at the ruins.

In my eagerness I began to run, for now I knew my way, and had no longer need either to look at my compass or blaze trees. A few minutes later I was within the precincts of the palace, which I entered by one of the many gaps in the walls. I quite expected to find my companions up and waiting for me, and to hear that a part of the day, at least, had been spent in seeking me in the forest. But they did not even show a light; all were seemingly fast asleep; and, hurt and mortified by their indifference and neglect, I crept silently into my hammock, and so great was my fatigue that, despite my vexation, I fell at once into a deep and dreamless slumber.

When I awoke it was full daylight, and knowing from the silence of the forest that it must be near noon, I saw without surprise that all the hammocks were vacant. Wildfell and the others had doubtless got up long since, and were now busy with their treasure-hunting.

"Yet surely," I thought, "Pedro must be somewhere about. If all the others have gone mad with greed, he at any rate has kept his senses—and I want some breakfast. Where is he, I wonder? Pedro! Pedro! Hang the fellow! where can he be? I suppose he has forgotten all about me, like the rest. They must have made another find, and can think about nothing else. I will go and see. I wish we had never seen this confounded place. It will be our ruin yet."

With that I slipped lazily out of my hammock, sauntered slowly to the other end of the palace, and picked my way down the great flight of steps at the principal entrance, for they were covered with brambles and full of holes.

Strange! I hear no voices. I see nothing of any of them. Where on earth can they be?

"Hallo there! Pedro! Gomez! Where are you?"

By this time I was close to the place which the *arrieros* and *mestizos* had chosen for their night-quarters, and run up, against one of the walls, a sort of lean-to shed, roofed with plantain leaves, under which they had slung their hammocks.

As I shouted, two hideous turkey-buzzards rose out of the bushes and flew heavily into the forest.

"What on earth?——"

And a great fear came over me, for I knew that these creatures always follow in the track of death. I pushed my way through the bushes, and there, before the hut, I found more vultures, which flew away as I

neared them, and four lifeless bodies—the bodies of four men almost denuded of flesh, their faces stripped to the bone, and their clothes in tatters. Though the poor wretches were disfigured past recognition, I felt sure that the remains were those of Hoss and Boss and the two *arrieros*.

The cause of their death was only too evident. They had been surprised and killed by the Chole Indians, either just as they rose from their hammocks or as they were about to turn in for the night. All had been mortally wounded by arrows. One victim had been hit in the eye, another in the region of the heart, a third in the side, a fourth in the back.

It was several minutes before I could take my eyes from the terrible sight and collect my thoughts.

Where were the others—Wildfell, Gomez, Ferdinando, and Pedro? Had they, too, fallen, like these poor fellows, without being able to strike a blow for their lives? They were not in the palace. Could they have been surprised while searching for that thrice-cursed treasure?

Sick with apprehension I hurried to the place where they had last been exploring—the foot of the great tower.

Not there!

I next made the complete round of the ruins, looking everywhere, always with the same result. Then I returned to the palace, of which I resolved to make a thorough search, feeling sure that it was there, if

anywhere, I should find a clue to the mystery. The first thing I noticed was that all the arms and nearly all the ammunition were missing, so were the *patates* except one (which, lying in a remote corner, had probably been overlooked). On closely examining the floor I could detect prints of naked feet, and I picked up an arrow which was certainly not there before. It was clear that the Choles had been here also. Yet, look as I would, I could discover neither trace of blood nor signs of a struggle.

How was this? Were the four whites taken prisoners, or had they escaped? Neither supposition seemed very probable. It was hard to believe that Wildfell, Gomez, and Ferdinando, to say nothing of Pedro, would yield without a struggle, and still harder to think that they *could* escape from a horde of fleet Indians, who were as much at home in the forest as the jaguars that lurked in its recesses and the monkeys that swarmed on the branches. Considering all these things, I could come to no other conclusion than that my unfortunate companions had been seized while lying in their hammocks, and overpowered and bound before they had time to think of resistance. The Choles must have stolen upon them literally like thieves in the night.

But why had they killed Hoss and Boss and the *arrieros* and saved the others alive? This part of the riddle I was unable to read. It would have been just as easy for the Indians to capture or kill eight as four.

And when had these events happened? Under ordinary circumstances I might have formed a tolerably correct idea from an examination of the bodies. But they had been so maltreated by the turkey-buzzards that there was hardly anything left to examine. Yet indications were not entirely wanting. As the victims lay so near their night-quarters, and the other four were beyond doubt seized in the palace, the time must necessarily have been either early in the morning or late at night; and it could not have been night, because, as I well knew, the darkness after sunset was too intense to permit the savages to take aim with their arrows. It must therefore have been morning, and very shortly after I went after the bird. I had left them all fast asleep; and a few minutes after the *arrieros* and *mestizos* (always the first to get up) rose, and probably before the others awakened, the Choles were upon them.

That bird had saved my life.

Just then, however, I did not feel very thankful for the boon—I was too much overcome with horror and grief, and I bitterly regretted having induced these eight men to take part in so desperate an enterprise; above all, the *arrieros*, who had come so reluctantly. True, the others, save Pedro, had courted their fate by neglecting my warnings, and I was thus in a measure, so far as they were concerned, absolved from blame. But this consideration, though it might soothe my conscience, could not lessen my sorrow. Wildfell, Gomez, and Pedro, were good men and true; we had been so

much together, and I had got to know them so well, that their loss affected me quite as much as if they had been old and long-tried friends.

Yes, loss, for nothing was more certain than that I should never see them again, and I was haunted by a terrible fear that the Choles had saved my companions alive in order to torture them to death. More than once the idea occurred to me of trying to make out the trail, and following them. But how could I hope to overtake a detachment of Indians familiar with the forest, who had more than twenty-four hours' start of me, and what could I do if I did overtake them?

All day long I wandered aimlessly and dejected about the ruins, and it was only when night fell and I lay down in my hammock that I became sufficiently composed to look my position fairly in the face, and decide what course it behoved me to adopt.

One thing was quite clear—I must make a move. The Choles might come back, and, whether they did or not, nothing was to be gained by remaining one moment longer in these ill-omened ruins. But whither should I go? Back again by the road I had come! No! A thousand times no! The very fact that my enterprise had entailed so much trouble, and cost so many lives, rendered it more imperative than ever that I should persevere, make at least one more effort to discover the object of my quest. Success justifies everything; failure, though it may result from misfortune, is more often the outcome of weakness and irresolution.

As for the danger, it would be quite as dangerous to advance as to retreat, and by going forward I might, even if I did not reach the Phantom City, discover some clue to its whereabouts.

So, early on the following morning, after taking a bath in the mountain stream, I rolled up my hammock and my *patate*, strapped them to my back, shouldered my gun, and plunged once more into the forest.

I had unfortunately very little powder and shot, my supply consisting only of the few cartridges in my pocket, and a few more which the Choles had overlooked. I put all the *totoposte* that was left carefully into my pack, resolving to use it only in the last extremity; for the time might come when I should be unable to obtain either fruit or game.

The first day I made fair progress. The forest was almost free from undergrowth. I had neither much cutting to do nor many detours to make, and when I halted for the night, an hour before sunset, I reckoned that I had done something like twenty miles. Having a keen recollection of my recent experience, I made such arrangements as I thought would enable me to pass the night in comparative peace and security. Light a fire I dared not, for there could be little doubt that I was in the Chole country, and as likely as not within a mile or two of one of their villages. So, after clearing a space with my *machete*, I slung my hammock on the branches of a huge *cantamon*, placed my gun within reach, and as soon as it was dark turned in and slept

until the moon rose. Then I got up and resumed my tramp. I was still on falling ground, and likely to be so for some time; for marching, as before, in a south-westerly direction, I was descending the Cordilleras very gradually. In this way I avoided the hot and humid plains of the *tierra caliente*, which lay lower down, and neared the region where, in my imaginary chart, I had placed the Phantom City.

So far I had subsisted on bananas; but uncooked bananas, besides being too tasteless and monotonous to be pleasant, are not sufficiently nourishing to keep up a man's strength under the strain of hard work, and I felt that, unless I got something more concentrated and nitrogenous, I should soon break down. I don't like killing monkeys, they are so like human-kind, and it is pitiful to see them die; moreover, the report of my gun might bring upon me unseen enemies. But necessity has no law, and it would be better to risk death by a Chole arrow than to fall ill and, perchance, perish miserably by the way. Several monkeys were hanging about on the trees, eyeing me curiously, and probably wondering to what branch of the great Simiadæ family I belonged. Choosing one of the biggest, I brought him down with a single shot, and to my great satisfaction the creature died without a struggle.

Having killed my monkey, the next thing was to cook him, to which end it would be necessary to kindle a fire, and I decided to perform the operation at high noon, when the Choles would be the least likely to

favour me with their attentions. In this I succeeded to admiration; the monkey was done to a turn. I roasted at the same time some bananas, and after enjoying an excellent dinner and having a good rest, I packed up the remnants of my feast and hied me onward.

I had not gone far when, happening to glance over my shoulder, I was startled to see, creeping stealthily some two-score yards behind me, a black jaguar of fierce aspect and portentous size. I wheeled round as promptly as a soldier on parade, and as I did so the great cat slunk into the thicket. Then I went on again, taking care to look back every few minutes, and I very soon became convinced that the jaguar was stalking me. When I faced him he vanished; but the moment I moved on he followed in my track. I dare say he had been attracted in the first instance by the smell of my roast monkey, and probably smelt it still.

Without being alarmed, I was uneasy. Unless cornered or rendered desperate by hunger or hurts, a jaguar seldom attacks a man openly. It has, however, no objection to take him by surprise, or tackle him when he sleeps. Herein lay my danger. If the creature kept following me—and I had heard of jaguars following solitary travellers for days together—what was I to do? Except while awake and on my guard, I should never be safe. However high I might sling my hammock, I should be in danger; for the American tiger can climb a tree however smooth. A fire might

be some protection, but only so long as it was well kept up, and even if there were no Choles to take into account, I could not sleep and keep up a good fire at the same time. With a rifle I could have made short work of the beast, but wounding it with small shot would ensure an immediate attack, and in a "rough-and-tumble" with that black jaguar I should be likely to come off second best.

As long as daylight lasted I had certain evidence—that of my own eyes—that the creature was keeping up the chase, and I felt sure that when night came it would not be far off.

Though I took the precaution to sling my hammock to a slender branch that could not well have borne a tiger's weight, I did not sleep a wink. I was always fancying that I could hear my pursuer prowling about, and see his eyes blazing in the darkness.

And probably not without reason, for I had not walked a mile next morning when I saw him, creeping after me as before, and, as before, he slunk into the bushes when I turned round and faced him. This sort of thing was becoming unbearable. The sensation of being stalked is the reverse of pleasant, and I felt that if I did not soon get rid of the brute, he would soon get rid of me. Sooner or later I must sleep, and then——

There was only one way, and when I reached a place where the ground was pretty level and the forest open, I lay down behind a big tree, taking care to have my

gun and *machete* close at hand. A few minutes later I saw the tiger following in my track with his nose to the ground, just like a hound hunting a cold scent.

I remained as still as a mouse until he was well within range, and then, letting fly right at his head with both barrels, seized my *machete* and sprang to my feet.

The next moment the enraged brute, terribly peppered about the face and half blinded with his own blood, came at me with a roar. As he sprang I struck him hard with my *machete*, splitting his skull down to the neck, and we rolled on the ground together.

I got up not much the worse, though one of his claws had rather lacerated my shoulder; and thinking his skin might possibly prove useful, I took it from him, and continued my journey with an easier mind.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE RAPIDS.

EIGHT days after leaving the ruins, I reached the banks of a broad and swift river. It was time, for as I left the Cordilleras behind me, and drew nearer to the *tierra caliente*, the forest again became less open, the undergrowth denser and more tangled, the temperature higher, and I could only make headway slowly and by dint of severe and exhausting toil. My strength was beginning to fail me, my *machete* was fast wearing out, and I was forced to admit that, alone and without help, I could not possibly go on; that for the time, at least, I must abandon my quest, and give up my hope of finding the Phantom City.

As I reached this conclusion I chanced to look skyward, and there, high above the tree-tops, a great condor, which had evidently just crossed the Cordilleras, was winging his flight towards the south-west—exactly the direction I desired to take, and where, as I believed, lay the mysterious country which I was beginning to fear I should never see.

“In an hour, perhaps in half an hour,” I thought, “that bird may be flying over the Phantom City. It is possible that he sees it even now. If I could only

borrow his wings! By Jove! Why should not I do it in a balloon?"

The idea seemed so wild and absurd that I laughed aloud, and turned my thoughts to the accomplishment of the scheme which I had already devised—floating down the river on a raft. What river it was, or whither it went, I had no means of knowing; probably either the Usamacinta itself or one of its tributaries. There was just a possibility that it might run past the Phantom City; if not, then to some place in Guatemala or Yucatan, whence I could make a fresh start or return to England. As to that, however, I should have to take my chance. It was a case of Hobson's choice. The current being too swift to be ascended without a boat and oars, I had no alternative but to swim with the stream, both literally and metaphorically.

So I set about making a raft—not a very difficult undertaking. I cut a number of logs, made them of equal length, and fastened them together with lianas, which, when dry, bind as firmly as iron wire. Then I stiffened and strengthened the structure with cross pieces, rigged up the jaguar's skin as an awning, cut a long forked pole for steering and poling, and the job was finished.

I did this in two days, and on the third I launched my barque on the unknown river, letting it take me whither it would. Its course was tortuous in the extreme, sometimes running due south, until I thought it would end in the Pacific; then, bending eastward, as if

it would take me straight to the Atlantic. So frequent were its twists and turns, that without my compass I should have been at a loss to know, even vaguely, where my journey was likely to terminate, and as my sextant was one of the things taken by the Choles, I had no means of ascertaining my position.

I travelled only by day and light of moon. An hour or so before sunset I generally moored my raft to a tree, and slung my hammock to a branch which overhung the stream. I was thus always ready to be off on the least alarm.

As touching food, I was now in a land of plenty. The forest abounded with birds and monkeys, and the water with fish. I had a few hooks in my pocket-book, a line was easily made, and whatever might be the bait, I was never long in getting a bite.

The scenery was superb ; the stream flowed through an umbrageous alley of gigantic trees, so lofty that they seemed at times to reach the sky ; flowers of exquisite loveliness were reflected in the bosom of the silent river ; vines trailed everywhere in the most bewildering confusion ; old boughs, some of them as thick as young trees, closely intertwined and covered with bulbous plants and pendent flowers, hung over the water, true ærial gardens of Nature's own making. All this made up a picture which in richness and variety of colouring, splendour, and luxuriance of vegetation, surpassed in its beauty the wildest dreams of the most vivid imagination.

But the loneliness of that serene river was unspeakably oppressive; I would gladly have given all its beauty for a single grasp of Wildfell's friendly hand, a word from Don Gomez, or a glimpse of Pedro's honest face.

What had become of them? Had they, as I feared, been tortured and killed, or did they still live, the prisoners and slaves of their captors? These questions continually recurred to me, and the idea of trying to reach the hidden city in a balloon, which, at the outset, I had dismissed as impracticable and absurd, began to take shape and substance in my thoughts. True, it was a most forlorn hope, yet it seemed to be the only chance now left of accomplishing my purpose. After all that had come to pass I could not ask anybody else to share in the perils of a second expedition. Undertaken alone, and on foot, it would be an act of sheerest folly and a predestined failure. But in a balloon I might manage without help; a fair wind would carry me in a few hours further than I could walk in as many weeks, and whether I succeeded or failed the risk would be mine, and mine only. Everything considered, moreover, it did not seem that an aërial voyage would be either more dangerous or more difficult than a land journey, and I had now two motives—the desire to find the Phantom City and the hope of hearing something of my lost companions.

After long cogitation I resolved that if I got safely to my journey's end I would try and put the project into execution.

Since leaving the ruins I had seen no sign of human presence. But this did not surprise me. The Indians could not be everywhere ; in a region so thickly wooded they would congregate chiefly in the neighbourhood of their villages, and keep to the tracks made by themselves, and those parts of the country with which they were most familiar. I had also heard that they were indifferent boatmen, and greatly preferred land to water. All the same, I kept a sharp look-out, especially at points where the river was joined by its tributaries. I began to have doubts as to the former being the Usamacinta, for on the third day of my voyage it ran into another river, equally large ; and "which was which" I had no means of ascertaining.

The two combined formed a noble and picturesque stream, on whose meandering waters my raft floated at the rate of from two to four miles an hour. Its course, though devious, was due east. There could be little doubt that I was nearing the confines of the Known, and the further I went the more apprehensive I became as to what might befall me later on, for the Lacandones, as I well knew, kept a strict watch at the entrance to their domain. It was evident, too, that, whatever might be the name or the source of the first stream I encountered, that now, at least, I was on the Usamacinta. The wooded heights to the north were unquestionably the lower slopes of the Cordilleras, and, instead of flowing tranquilly between level banks, the river was forcing its way

through deep gorges and sweeping past lofty bluffs. The channel grew narrower, the current more impetuous; every hour brought me nearer to the mountain gap by which the great river reaches the plains of Tobasco and the Gulf of Mexico.

The navigation of my raft had, so far, presented no difficulty. True, it was rather a clumsy concern, but I could always control it with my make-shift boat-hook, and to pull up I had only to throw overboard the big stone which I used as an anchor. But where the river narrowed, and consequently deepened, this resource, owing to the shortness of my rope, failed me, and the current being now extremely rapid, I feared that if I once got into the middle of the stream I might be swept onward without power either to stop or steer.

In these circumstances I thought it the part of prudence to hug the shore, using my pole now as a pusher, now as a rudder, occasionally hooking it to a root or a branch, always managing, one way or another, to keep near the bank.

Going on in this style I one day reached a small creek, and, feeling tired, pushed my raft into its smoother water, let go my stone, and 'was lying down on my tiger-skin for a few minutes' rest, when, happening to look up stream, I saw, to my horror, a large canoe with half-a-dozen nearly naked Indians on board, coming towards me at a great rate. That they meant mischief was evident from the fact that all, save one

who was paddling, were fitting arrows to the big bows with which each was armed.

Without a moment's hesitation I cut my cable, and pushed the raft into the middle of the stream. I was between the devil and the deep sea; but everything considered, I preferred the perils of the one to the tender mercies of the other.

The canoe was clumsy and lopsided, and as only one man was paddling, it went little faster than the raft. Yet, despite its comparative slowness, it gained on me; the distance between us rapidly diminished, and it was clear that we should soon be at close quarters.

I laid down my pole, took up my gun, and, kneeling on the tiger-skin, prepared to fire so soon as the canoe should be well within range. I did not think I had much chance of escaping; but, come what might, I was determined not to be taken alive.

At about fifty yards' distance the Indians let fly at me a shower of arrows, but owing to the wobbling of the canoe and the movement of the raft, all went wide. I did not reply for a couple of minutes, and then, taking deliberate aim at the paddler, I gave him a dose of small shot slap in the face, and fired the second barrel right into the thick of the others.

Great confusion ensued on board the canoe. The paddler, giving a fearful yell, dropped his paddle into the water; the boat, swept round by the current, nearly came to grief. It was several minutes before the crew could right her and resume the chase. The paddler seemed

to be badly hurt ; he laid himself down in the bottom of the canoe, and paddled no more. I could also see by the gesticulation of his companions, and their bleeding faces, that some of them, too, had got pretty well peppered. They shouted savagely, threatened me with their spears, and when they had recovered from their confusion, one of them took the place of the prostrate paddler, and the vigour and energy of his strokes showed how eager they were to overtake me and have their revenge.

While this was going on I had reloaded my gun with the last cartridges, save two, I possessed, and made ready for the reception of my pursuers as before. This time they came on more cautiously, displaying as little of their persons as might be, and, except the man who was paddling, I could see little more of them than the tops of their heads. But this position was not particularly favourable for archery practice, and the first arrows they shot either stuck in the sides of the raft, or fell into the water.

As for myself, seeing how nearly my ammunition was exhausted, I resolved to reserve my fire until I could do certain execution. I watched the advancing canoe with the closest attention, waiting for the most propitious moment, and was just about to discharge my second broadside, when one of the fellows in the forepart of the canoe raised a loud shout, dropped his bow, and seized a paddle. All the others followed his example. Thinking they were going to board me,

refrained from firing until I could do so with the best effect. To my great surprise, however, the savages headed the canoe for the nearest bank, paddling as if they were possessed.

All this time I had been looking up stream, and letting the raft take care of itself.

A swift glance ahead revealed the secret of my enemies' sudden retreat. The river—now running more impetuously than ever—was entering a rocky defile, the sides of which rose sheer out of the water fully a thousand feet. We were in the rapids, and if the Indians had not stopped where they did they would not have been able to stop at all.

As for me, I could not have stopped even if I had tried, and I did not try. The river and the Indians left me no alternative but to go on and take what came, resigning myself to my fate with such fortitude as I might be able to muster. Had I been sure there was nothing worse to come this would not have been very difficult, for though the river ran like a mill-race the water was smooth, and nothing could be more delightful than the swift, undulating motion of the raft. But for anything I knew, and more likely than not, there were rocks and falls ahead, which it might be impossible to pass and live.

Before I was half through the defile a heavy booming sound struck on my ear, which justified my worst forebodings. Every moment this ominous din grew louder; every moment the deep dark torrent, shut in

between frowning rocks, sped on with increased velocity. I laid me down and clung to the woodwork of the raft with the energy of despair.

A few minutes later the river broadened out and became violently agitated, apparently by a fresh wind and the force of invisible currents. The raft was whirled round and round in the seething water until I grew so sick and dizzy that I could hardly hold on.

This lasted for about ten minutes, when, reaching the edge of the whirlpool, I was literally spun into smoother water.

Raising my head, and clearing the water from my eyes, I look down the river, now rolling majestically through an avenue of nodding palms and lordly forest trees, with stems like the columns of some great cathedral shining like silver in the sun under domes of emerald verdure.

It is hard, amid all this romantic beauty, to believe that I am a helpless waif, hurrying swiftly to destruction. Yet the terrible din, growing every moment louder and still louder, tells me that the fatal moment is at hand—that my very minutes are numbered. And now the stream makes a bend, and I see that a mile or so farther on the river disappears, leaps down a chasm of unknown depth, above which rises a cloud of mist and spray, spanned by a rainbow of exquisite loveliness—emblem of hope for the hopeless.

Nearer and nearer I am borne towards the chasm.

The uproar is terrific, deafening. I strain my eyes in

a vain attempt to see through the foam-cloud. I am on the very brink. I cling to the raft with all my might; I breathe a prayer for God's help; give myself up for lost, and the next moment am swept down to unfathomable depths.

But the instinct of life is strong. When I find myself in deep water I strike out with all my strength, for I have parted company with the raft—which, by breaking my fall, has saved my life—and just as my senses are leaving me I contrive to reach the surface and refill my lungs. Then under I go again, only to rise again the moment after. I fight on in this way for fully half an hour, seeing nothing but foam, hearing nothing but the roar of the cataract. Yet all the time I must have been drifting—going with the stream—for though the uproar continues, the turmoil and tossing gradually cease, and at length, breathless and exhausted, I find myself in smoother water.

The relief and blessedness of it are past telling. Not so much because my life is saved as that I am at peace. The struggle is over, and I let myself float gently down the river, looking once more at the bright sun and the blue sky, and watching the trees glide swiftly by, with a sense of enjoyment intensified by the recollection of the terrible ordeal I have just undergone.

The current is still so rapid that every effort I make to reach land is a failure, and I begin to fear that I have passed through the peril of the falls only to perish of exhaustion in the water. Several times, when almost

touching the bank, I am swept back into the middle of the stream.

At last the river does for me what I could not do for myself—throws me ashore, as it rounds a promontory. Crawling out of the water, more dead than alive, spent by exertion and overcome by mental strain, I lie down in the warm sunshine to rest my limbs, dry my rags, and think what I shall do next.

CHAPTER XIII.

BACK AGAIN.

THOUGH the sun was shining, and Nature all loveliness, I could not see daylight. Here I was, in an unknown, uninhabited country, with nothing in the world but a pair of much-worn trousers and a ragged shirt. Raft, *machete*, gun, shoes, hat—all were gone. Even the natives could not go about uncovered; and though, at a pinch, I might improvise a hat out of a leaf, I did not see how, without a knife, I could make myself any sort of foot-gear, and only those who have tried it know the hardship—I had almost said the impossibility—of walking unshod over rough ground, among brambles and thorns, in a tropical wilderness.

How far I might be from a human habitation I had no idea, neither could I tell whether I was out of the wild Indian territory. And where should I find shelter, where obtain food, how, weaponless as I was, defend myself from wild animals?

One way and another I was undeniably in a pretty tight fix. All that I had left was my life; and though I had been terribly buffeted in the water, I had suffered no serious damage, and possessed the full use of my limbs. Bad as my case was it might have been worse,

and if, as I hoped, I had got out of the Lacandone country and could fall in with a tame Indian, all might yet be well. Anyhow, there was no use staying where I was; so, after I had rested myself, I twisted a leaf round my head, and set off on a new tour of exploration, picking my way with great care, and walking as gingerly as a man with unboiled peas in his shoes. But do as I would my feet got terribly cut and bruised, becoming at length so painful that if anything less than my life had been at stake I should hardly have had the resolution to persevere.

Crossing the promontory where I had landed, I followed the river bank (occasionally laving my feet in the water) which was hereabouts pretty straight. After limping two or three miles, I came to an expanse of beautiful park-like country, the trees growing singly and in groups, on ground carpeted with grass and flowers—a glorious tropical garden. On the other side of the river stretched a broad savanna with a background of luxuriant vegetation and wood-crowned heights.

The scene seemed familiar to me. But I had beheld so many like scenes that, after a moment's pause, I trudged wearily on, looking out for bananas, for I felt terribly hungry. Then I looked again, and the more I looked the more I felt convinced that I had seen it all before.

“Yes it is! No it is not! By Jove, it is—the very place where we slung our hammocks the night before we

started for Flores! The village where we got our horses must be on the other side of that clump of mimosa trees."

"But I am on the wrong side of the river. Never mind! I will swim it. Better drown than starve."

Fortunately the flow was becoming less swift, and, picking a place where the stream was broadest and therefore most shallow and least rapid, I plunged in, and by swimming obliquely, and as much against the current as possible, I managed, with some difficulty, to fetch the opposite bank.

An hour later I was at the village.

How the tame Indians and mestizos stared at me! And no wonder, for, with my long hair and beard, my leaf-covered head, bare and bleeding feet, ragged shirt, and dirty trousers, I must have looked more like an escaped lunatic than a sane Christian. But, without saying a word to anybody, I went straight to the house of the *jefe politico* (chief magistrate) whose acquaintance I had made before my start for Flores, and told my tale—or, at any rate, so much of it as I thought necessary. I said nothing about the Phantom City, and toned down considerably the story of my adventures. He looked serious and sympathetic when I mentioned the loss of my companions, was in no way surprised that I had been pursued by the Lacandones; but, though too polite to say so, he evidently disbelieved my account of the voyage down the Usamacinta and the passage of the falls.

That, however, was of no moment. I did not want him to believe me. I wanted him only to help me to get back to Flores. I had a gold piece or two stitched in the waistband of my trousers—enough to keep me a few days and buy some clothes, but not enough to pay the hire of mules and *arrieros* to Flores. But I could promise to pay when we got there, and I asked the *jefe politico* to assist me in making an arrangement on this basis. At first he demurred, said it could not be done; and if the men who went with me before had not been willing to go with me again, and trust to my promise to pay them when we got to Flores, I should have been in an awkward dilemma. However the business was put through, and, after a good deal of tiresome palaver, they agreed to have everything ready for a start on the day but one following.

While this was going on, a fowl, ordered at my suggestion by the *jefe politico*, had been roasting, and I ate every bit of it, barring the bones. I next bought a suit of clothes and a pair of boots, and they suited me so well that I might easily have passed for a Guatemalan *caballero*.

I need not describe the journey, which was a repetition of the first, only rather easier, owing to the track having been recently traversed. The dear old *corregidor* received me with open arms, and seemed hugely delighted by the fulfilment of his prediction.

“I knew you would come back,” he said. “You could not help it now, could you? Flores is really

so charming, the climate so perfect, the *señoritas* so lovely. You have not forgotten that *tertulia*, I'll be bound. We will have another in honour of your return. You left some aching hearts behind you, Señor Don, you and the Señor Americano del Norte. And Señor Don Gomez de la Plata y Sombrero, how is he—well, I hope?"

When I told him of the terrible fate that had befallen my friends and the *arrieros*, his countenance fell, and he seemed much distressed.

"How sad! how very sad!" he exclaimed. "But I was afraid—I was afraid, when you said you were going to look for ruined cities, that you might venture into the wild Indian country; but I knew that, even if I warned you, you would not take heed. English *caballeros* and *Americanos del Norte* are so headstrong. You are the first that ever went so far and lived to tell the tale. You owe your life to the favour of Heaven and the Holy Virgin, Señor Doctor. The *cura* shall say masses for the souls of your friends and the *arrieros*. I will charge myself with the expense."

"You think they are dead, then?"

"There cannot be a doubt of it. When the Choles take prisoners they put them to death with frightful tortures and then eat them."

"But how can you know this, if, as you say, nobody who goes into their country ever comes back?"

"Everybody says the Choles torture and devour their prisoners. Do you think everybody would say so

if it were not true? It is a great pity. The Señor Americano del Norte—I cannot pronounce his name—was a fine man, though a little eccentric. And Don Gomez, with his guitar and love songs, was a noble *caballero*. He made a great impression on the hearts of our *señoritas*. He will have many fair mourners. There will be weeping eyes in Flores to-night. I think we had better not have the *tertulia* this evening, as I intended. We will put it off until Sunday. Three days are long enough to mourn. The departed would not like it to be longer, I am sure. Life is too short to be made miserable by useless regrets. You will be very happy in Flores, Señor Doctor. It is a pleasant place. And the *señoritas*—ah, the *señoritas*! But you have seen them. I need say no more. And you may have your choice, Señor Doctor. The most beautiful will be delighted to become your bride.”

I expressed, in fitting terms, my sense of the honour he proposed to confer upon me, but assured him that I had no intention of taking to myself a wife just yet—to the worthy *corregidor's* great surprise, for he looked upon a bachelor as something abnormal and monstrous, much as he would have looked upon a man who should deliberately refuse to go to heaven. And then he inquired, with much concern, whether I would not accept the offer he had made me before—settle in Flores, and become the physician of the district, promising me, in addition to the other inducements already mentioned, a lucrative practice and an easy life.

After thanking him warmly for his kind intentions on my behalf, I said that, albeit I could not very well make Flores my permanent home, I would stay a pretty long time, and during my sojourn I should only be too glad to place such medical and surgical skill as I possessed at the disposal of himself and the people of his district. The old gentleman, though evidently disappointed that I did not accept his proposals without reserve, thanked me with effusion for so far complying with his wishes, found me lodgings in one of the best houses in the village, and got me everything I asked. I need hardly say that I asked for nothing he could not easily procure.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW DEPARTURE.

My next proceeding was to write to a scientific friend in London to order me a balloon and a net (if he could not get them ready-made) of certain dimensions, a few lengths of iron piping, india-rubber tubing, an electro-magnetic machine, a field-glass, a small telescope, arms, and some other things. All these were to be sent securely packed to Belize, which place I found could be reached in sixteen days—ten by river and six by road—and whither, when the time came, I proposed to go myself to arrange for their safe transport to Flores. I also wrote to Dominick (of whose thousand pounds a considerable balance still remained), giving an account of my proceedings, and telling him of my new project. I begged him, however, to observe the strictest secrecy, for I had resolved not only to make my aërial voyage alone, but to acquaint nobody (save my backer and paymaster) with my purpose and proposed destination.

The *arrieros* who had accompanied me to Flores undertook to forward my letters to Carmen, and I took the precaution to send duplicates by a trader who was going to Merida.

I could not expect answers much under two or three

months, even if there should be no delays; and the balloon and etceteras might not arrive at Belize for twice two months. This, however, was rather an advantage than a drawback, for I stood in need of rest, and required ample time for preparation. My scheme had not yet been worked out in detail, and I foresaw that I should have much to do and many difficulties to overcome.

The balloon would reach me in a very incomplete state. I should have to make the car, fix up some sort of apparatus for producing gas, prepare the minds of the unsophisticated Floreseros for an experiment which, as likely as not, they would regard as uncanny and diabolic; and obtain the *corregidor's* co-operation in my enterprise without disclosing its true object—for, if fully enlightened, he would of a surety throw every possible impediment in my way, perhaps think himself justified in hindering by force the consummation of so mad a design.

But he was a dear, credulous old man, with a profound respect for science, of whose later achievements some hazy and exaggerated accounts had reached him, and he had a vague idea that there was hardly anything beyond the power of science to accomplish, except, perhaps, raising the dead and preventing earthquakes. Of earthquakes, like nearly all who have beheld their effects, he stood in mortal terror. Slight shocks were occasionally felt at Flores; and though he did not like to confess it, he was apprehensive that there would one

day come to pass a frightful catastrophe. I took a base advantage of this weakness—if weakness it was—talked learnedly about atmospheric phenomena, electricity, the earth's crust, volcanoes, and the like, and I suggested that, in the event of an earthquake occurring at Flores, a captive balloon might be utilised as an “ark of refuge.” On this I had, of course, to explain what captive balloons were like, the manner of their use, and some other things. The idea pleased the *corregidor* much; and when I expressed my willingness to construct a balloon and fly it at Flores, his delight knew no bounds, and he promised me all the help he could give.

This preliminary difficulty overcome, I had to consider the question of gas. My first idea had been to inflate my balloon on the Montgolfier system, by heated air; but that would involve the necessity of a light, and, apart from the danger this would entail, a fire balloon requires much more attention than a gas balloon; and as I proposed to travel without company, ease of management was absolutely essential. English aëronauts generally use coal-gas, which, though not pure hydrogen, answers the purpose. But in Peten there are neither coal-mines nor gas-works, and I should have to provide myself with the means of flying my balloon as best I could. Hydrogen exists everywhere, in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the wood we burn. The difficulty was to capture and confine, with the limited facilities at my disposal, a sufficient quantity of it to carry

me over the Cordilleras, and, if need were, to the Quesaltenango mountains, on the Pacific coast.

Pouring sulphuric acid on zinc is perhaps the easiest way of making hydrogen, but as I had neither zinc nor sulphuric acid, it was not a way I could adopt. I next thought of extracting it from water by passing steam over iron filings. Unfortunately, however, there were no iron filings in Flores, so that plan had also to be dropped. In the end I decided to effect my object by the destructive distillation of wood in a sealed retort, just as coal is distilled for lighting purposes in ordinary gas-works. True, the resulting product would not be pure hydrogen, yet it would be light enough to float my balloon, which was all I wanted. The process is simple, and I was quite familiar with it; on the other hand, Flores possessed few resources, and hardly any skilled labour, so that I had to do nearly all the work myself. But necessity is the mother of invention, and pending the arrival of the balloon and the other materials for which I had sent to England, I managed to fix up a furnace, build a retort of adobes lined with cement—which I thought would stand fire for at least a few hours—and made a drop-well. As I did not require the gas for illuminating purposes, there was no need to be very particular in the matter of purifying. My chief aim was to obtain as large a proportion of carburetted hydrogen as possible, which could best be done by quick heating of the retort; and I knew that the resinous woods that abounded in

the neighbourhood would make even a hotter fire than coal.

The car was a simpler matter than I had expected. A big basket would do, and one of the few craftsmen of whom Flores could boast happened to be a basket-maker, who, working under my direction, produced a roomy and sufficiently substantial article.

At length came advice of the shipment of the balloon and the other things, and of the date of their probable arrival at Belize, whither I went to receive them. Their transport to Flores proved a stiffer job than I had anticipated; but it was put through, and the packages reached their destination in "good order and safe condition."

I found the Floreseros in a state of intense excitement. My preparations were, of course, no secret, and the *corregidor* had talked much and largely of the balloon, and the wonders I was going to perform. The result was in some respects decidedly inconvenient, for I had so many voluntary assistants that I hardly knew which way to turn. The *señoritas* were especially curious and inquisitive, and drove me nearly wild with their questions and observations.

But everything has an end, and, after much toil and worry, and one or two vexatious breakdowns, I got my apparatus into working order, and proceeded to inflate my balloon, first taking care that it was safely tethered. It filled well, and rose magnificently. Then I hauled it down to the level of the ground, showed the *corregidor*

inside, got in myself, and directed my assistants to let it rise about two-score yards.

When the old gentleman felt himself going up he became terribly alarmed.

"Suppose the ropes break?" he said, turning very pale.

"Then we shall have a delightful ride through the air."

"Heaven forbid! Why, we might go to the moon!"

"Possibly. Shall we try? I dare say I could stop it and come down if you wanted; and you have no idea what a delicious sensation it is, floating over the mountain-tops and cruising among the stars."

"*Caramba*, Señor Doctor! Take heed what you say. If I did not know you so well, I should think——"

"What?"

"That you were an emissary of the Evil One, luring me to destruction." (Here his teeth began to chatter, warm though it was). "Would you mind, dear Señor Doctor, telling the men to pull us down? I fear my wife—she is there watching us—will be getting uneasy, I do indeed. For myself I do not care; but when ladies are concerned, we must consider their feelings rather than our desires. And Martha, though a stout woman, is very nervous. See, she beckons to us. Do, please!"

Thinking I had teased the old gentleman enough, I directed the men to haul the balloon down.

“Thank Heaven and the Holy Virgin I am once more on firm ground !” exclaimed the *corregidor*, as he embraced his wife. “I will never get into that thing again. I would rather take my chance in an earthquake. And don’t you, Señor Doctor. Let it go—to the moon, if it will. It is an accursed invention, and will bring you no luck !”

I could see by the looks and hear by the murmurs of the bystanders that they fully shared the *corregidor*’s views; and I have no doubt they thought in their hearts that the balloon was the handiwork, more or less, of our ghostly foe.

It was not without intention that I had frightened the *corregidor*, and refrained from letting him see how easily I could lower the balloon by letting out gas. To tell the truth, my conscience was beginning to reproach me for the part circumstances were compelling me to play. He was such a good old fellow, that it was really a shame to deceive him; to deceive him and hurt his feelings at the same time would have been too bad, and I wanted so to manage matters that the deception should never be known. Better leave him to the belief that I had been carried off *nolens volens* by a devil-possessed balloon, than let him deem me guilty of the unkindness and ingratitude of stealing away without giving a hint of my intention, or saying a word of farewell. I liked the old man so much that I did not want him to think ill of me, and he and my other friends would unquestionably have destroyed the balloon, rather

than allow me to go. Their hostility to it was so great that they were as likely to destroy it as not, even if I remained; and unless I went at once, I might not get away at all. Another reason for immediate departure was the fact of the wind being fair. It varied from nor'-east by north, to east-nor'-east, and would carry me right over the Cordilleras, and, as I thought and hoped, across the valley of the upper Usamacinta.

I might never have such another chance. It would be folly to let it slip; so I made up my mind to start early on the following morning. After seeing that the balloon was well fastened, I had a few bags of sand put into it—as an additional precaution, and to keep it in a proper position, as I explained. To prevent the meddling of curious busybodies, I hinted that any touching of the ropes or other parts of the apparatus might cause a terrific explosion. When night came I put on board, unobserved, everything I wanted to take with me, and all that I was likely to require for my journey—water, food, clothing, instruments, the magneto-electric machine, arms and ammunition, and a few other odds and ends.

These preparations were by no means made with a light heart. I knew that I was embarking on a cruise which might cost me my life, and that in all probability I should never see Flores and its people again. They were a simple, kindly folk, and I had become much attached to them, and they, I think, to me. Señora Grijalva, my hostess, treated me as a member of her

family, and she had three charming daughters—Juanita, Patricia, and Antonia—who were even more amiable and gracious than their mother. Juanita was my favourite. She sang divinely, and played the *marimba* to perfection, was more thoughtful and intelligent than her sisters, and, if I could have done as the *corregidor* desired, I think it is very likely that Juanita—— However, it was not to be. I had other and sterner work before me than living a quiet, uneventful life in the land of flowers.

Poor Juanita! I have often wondered what she thought and how she felt when she saw my balloon sail away towards the unknown country beyond the dark Cordilleras.

A few days previously I had received a characteristic letter from Dominick, dated from Davos Platz in the Engadine. His health was already very much better, he said, but his breath had been completely taken away by my mad proposal to look for the Phantom City in a balloon. He besought me to think better of it. "You have done all that man could do." He went on: "To make another attempt would be something like a tempting of Providence. At the same time, you are just the man to refuse to listen to reason and to go your own way, whatever may be urged against it. And, really, you seem to have as many lives as a cat. If, after all, you persist in going up in a balloon, I believe you will come down, and that some time and somewhere or other we shall meet again. In this hope, I remain, truly your

friend, Peter Dominick.—P.S. Better give up the idea of meeting at Merida, I think. *If you do come down*, communicate with my bankers in London, and they will let you know where I am.—P.D.”

This letter, as may be supposed, did not shake my resolution in the least—rather encouraged me, in fact. It was true : I did seem to have as many lives as a cat. Like Napoleon, I had confidence in my star, and felt that, sooner or later, and somehow or other, I should succeed in my undertaking, and find the object of my quest.

Shortly after daylight on the following morning I left Señora Grijalva’s house for the last time, and in a very melancholy mood. I found the balloon all right, and, early as it was, surrounded by a small crowd of gaping villagers. I stepped at once into the car, and requested two of them who came to my help to let out the rope when I gave the word. I was scarcely seated when up came the *corregidor*, in a state of great excitement.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I am going to try if the balloon will still rise.”

“I would not if I were you. Suppose it refuses to come down! Let me entreat you, Señor Doctor! You are running into danger. Do not, I beg of you, compel me to exert my authority; but I shall really be obliged—I—I really shall——”

While he talked I gave the signal. A moment later the two men had paid out all the rope and I was a hundred feet above their heads.

“Come down, Señor Doctor ; come down !” screamed the *corregidor*. “Pull the ropes, Ramon ! Pull, Jose ! Make the accursed thing come down !”

But this was more than Ramon and José could do. The wind being strong, the balloon seemed much more disposed to pull them up than to let them pull it down. All they could do was to hold on. Seeing this the *corregidor* and several others ran to their help. At this moment one of the ropes (secretly unloosed by me) gave way. Ramon fell flat on his back, and Jose, after letting himself be lifted a few feet from the ground, followed his comrade's example, and rolled over his prostrate body.

I was off. The last I saw of the Floreseros was a mass of fear-stricken, upturned faces, among which I thought I could distinguish the honest countenance of the *corregidor* and the dark tender eyes of the lovely Juanita.

CHAPTER XV.

THROUGH THE AIR.

IN a few minutes Flores became a mere speck, and then faded utterly away. Beneath me, and to the furthest limits of the horizon, stretched a vast ocean of verdure, and from the height to which I had risen hill and dale seemed no more than the undulations of a sylvan sea. The streams were silver threads, the lakes diamonds; and though the great sun flamed in a sky of clearest blue, his heat was tempered by the breeze that wafted me along.

Yet, though so highly favoured by circumstances, I realised for the first time the desperate nature of the expedition in which I had engaged, and whatever may have been the cause—whether the intense loneliness of my position, or the reaction from the excitement of the last few days—my spirits fell as my balloon rose: I began to imagine all sorts of dread possibilities, and had it been in my power, I almost think I should have turned back. But I was now at the mercy of the wind, whither it led I must go. This was the alarming part of it: how long would the wind hold fair, and, if not, what then? I was between two oceans, and if a storm arose I might be driven towards the Pacific or the

Atlantic and perish miserably of starvation. It would be almost as bad were the wind to die out altogether and leave me becalmed. Or some accident might befall the balloon, the gas might escape, and after going up like a rocket, I might come down like a stick. But even if none of these things should happen, and my descent be voluntary, I might conceivably make a bad shot, and either drop into the crater of a volcano, the middle of a Chole village, or among a network of barrancas and cañons, from which extrication would be impossible. And supposing I escaped this and other dangers, how was I to identify the Phantom City if I should be so lucky as to come near it? How distinguish it from a mass of more than usually perfect ruins?

I might even—horrible thought—descend on the very ruins from which I had lately had so much difficulty in getting away!

I had thought of all these contingencies before—except, perhaps, the one last mentioned—and deliberately determined to risk them; but now that they stared me in the face, and might come to pass within a few hours, they looked much more formidable. I began to think myself quite as foolhardy as most sane people would have deemed me, and at that moment I regarded the odds against me as being about ten thousand to one.

However, I am never low-spirited for very long together, and the motion of the balloon was so pleasant, and the view so glorious, and the sense of speeding through the air without effort so exhilarating, that my

courage gradually returned. I lighted my pipe, and as I had looked on the dark side of the picture, I tried now to look on the bright side. The balloon was behaving admirably—that was one good thing; the weather was fine and the wind fair—two more good things. If the worst came to the worst, and I missed the Phantom City altogether, there seemed no reason why I should not carry on until I reached Totonicapan or Quesaltenango, where there were civilised settlements and a tame population. I had food and water enough for four days, and much less time than that would suffice to take me to the Pacific coast.

As for identifying the Phantom City, I must just take the truth of the legend and the story of the Cura's Chiché for granted, and only descend to *terra firma* when I distinctly saw a lake, an island, and a town.

A large sheet of water is, fortunately, a good sign, visible a long way off. Even now, high up as I was, I could easily, with the help of my field-glass, distinguish rivers and streams, which were scattered about like strings of pearl in an emerald sea. By letting off gas I could get closer to the ground whenever I liked; but as there was a certain amount of leakage always going on, and the gas I might lose could not be replaced, I did not want to resort to this expedient until it should become absolutely necessary, and I had reason to believe that I was approaching the locality where, in my imaginary chart, I had placed the Phantom City.

As yet, however, I had not crossed the Cordilleras,

and whatever else might be in doubt, there could be no question that I should have to cross the mountains before I could reach my destination.

Judging by the rapidly-changing character of the country and my own sensations, I was travelling at a fair rate. Towards noon I seemed to be getting nearer the ground. The streams grew bigger. I could distinguish, with the naked eye, hill from dale, bare barrancas from wooded heights: from which I inferred that I was over the Cordilleras, for my barometer told me that the balloon was not more than a hundred feet lower than it had been at the highest. This gave me great satisfaction; it showed that I was moving fast, and in the direction I wanted to go. It showed, too, that I was wasting little gas, and that I might hope to pass the highest point of the mountains without having to throw out sand.

I did not want for occupation. When not looking at my barometer, or casting an eye on the balloon, I was sweeping the country with my glass; and never did I behold a grander panorama than that which stretched beneath me. Dark valleys of immeasurable depth, tremendous precipices clothed with verdure, splendid peaks and castle-like crags, rearing their silvery crests in the azure sky, foaming torrents cleaving their way through primeval forests, here and there a mountain tarn glistening like a diamond in the sun, and far away to the sou'-west a rugged volcanic peak from which rose a long column of dark-blue smoke.

It was perhaps an hour past noon that, as I looked with delight on this incomparable scene, there came over it a startling change. It stood still. At the same time the pleasant breeze which had so far tempered the great heat as suddenly dropped. Then I knew that one of the things I most feared had come to pass—I was becalmed. Becalmed right over the pathless gorges and unexplored wilds of the Cordilleras, which no white man had ever seen and probably no human foot had ever trod. The balloon could not have stopped in a worse place—except perhaps over the crater of an active volcano. But there is a certain comfort in having no alternative, for where there is choice there is room for hesitation. Here, at least, there was none. I could only stay where I was and whistle for a wind; and at an altitude so great it was impossible for the air to remain long without movement. My great fear was that it might move the wrong way. But as worrying could have no effect upon atmospheric currents, I put down my glass and ate my dinner of jerked beef and tortillas with good appetite, and then, filling my pipe with Peten tobacco—the best in the world I think—lay down in the car, and consoled myself with a smoke.

After my smoke I indulged in a siesta, for I had slept little the night before, and the day was overpoweringly hot. I don't know how long I slept, but I awoke with a start and a sense of surprise, not remembering for a moment where I was. Then I rubbed my

eyes, and, shading them with my hands, looked up into the sky.

“Hang it!” I thought, “what can that speck be? A cloud?”

Hardly.

But whatever it might be it grew bigger and came nearer even as I looked. I took up my glass and looked again.

The speck was a bird—a very big bird, or at that distance, for it must have been miles away, I could not have seen it at all.

I watched the creature with sleepy curiosity, speculating as to the rate at which it might be travelling, and recalling the stories I had read of the rapid flight of vultures and falcons, and their wonderful powers of scent and vision, when it struck me that this particular bird I had in view seemed to be making straight for the balloon. From its great size, moreover, I took it to be a condor, the largest of known birds, a veritable monarch of the air, more than a match for buffalo or jaguar, strong enough to carry off a man as easily as an eagle carries off a leveret.

A single dash of its claws into the balloon would mean sudden collapse and swift destruction. The thought was appalling. I watched the huge thing with intense anxiety, hoping against hope that it had some other object, and would give me a wide berth.

But when it got within a mile and still came on

as straight as a die, I knew that I must prepare for a difficulty. The condor meant mischief.

I took up the repeating rifle, for which I had sent to England, resolving to fire the moment the bird came well within range and I could be sure of my aim.

When the great bird was about five hundred yards off he pulled up, and, poising himself on his outstretched wings, which must have reached fully fourteen feet, seemed to be making a critical examination of the balloon and its occupant. It was evidently the first ornithological specimen of the sort he had seen, and he was probably thinking whether it was safe to attack or good to eat. Then he wheeled slowly round, coming every time a little nearer, and I could now see, by the cartilaginous comb that crowned his head and the wattle which enveloped his neck, that he was a male. At length he appeared to have made up his mind for a still closer inspection, and with extended neck made straight for the balloon. In doing this he exposed his breast, for which, kneeling in the car, and taking steady aim, I fired.

The condor dropped like a stone. But only a few yards, and to rise again to the level of the balloon. On this I fired again—this time at the junction of the wing with the body. The shot was fatal, the wounded wing dropped useless by his side, and after a desperate effort to recover himself, the bird fell sheer down, struck against a pinnacle of rock, bounded off, and disappeared amongst the trees which grew at its foot.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief, for the danger had

been very real, and it was one on which I had in no wise counted. If the condor had come straight down, or while I was asleep, I should never have seen him, and our relative positions would have been reversed. I should have been down among the rocks, he up in the air. It was fortunate, too, that the balloon was still; had it been moving I could not have taken such good aim. On the other hand, it was probably this very stillness which had attracted the condor's attention, and, for aught I knew, might attract that of others; though as these birds generally confine themselves to the Andes and to heights of ten thousand feet and upwards, I rather thought the one I had shot was a straggler, driven from his native haunts by a rival, and that I should see no more of them.

I had just come to this satisfactory conclusion, and was leaning lazily over the side and smoking my relighted pipe, when I heard the whirr of wings behind me.

Before I could look round, the car gave a violent lurch, and I found myself outside, holding on for bare life to a rope which I had instinctively clutched as I fell.

The balloon had been attacked by a second condor, evidently the mate of the one I had killed; but, fortunately for me, instead of clawing the silk, she dashed against the car, which she had seized with her beak, and was now beating with her wings.

The additional weight was making the balloon descend rapidly, and the condor shook the car so much

that I had great difficulty in getting back ; but by a desperate effort I managed at last to get one foot inside, and, still holding the rope, I picked up my revolver and fired two bullets into the bird's neck. The wings stopped beating at once, but the beak remained firmly fixed in the basket-work, and the dead weight (now the wings were no longer beating) pulled the balloon down more than ever, so tilting the car that if it had not been for the rope I should certainly have fallen out again.

Steadying myself as well as I could I fired a third bullet, this time between the eyes ; but though the condor was now as dead as a stone, I had to prize the beak open with my *machete* before I could get rid of the carcase.

Then the balloon rose again and remained as still as before. Not knowing how many more condors might think fit to favour me with their intentions, I reloaded my rifle and revolver, thanked Heaven for my escape, and, like Wellington at Waterloo, prayed for night.

When I say the balloon was still, I do not mean that it was an absolute fixture, for though I felt no motion, I knew from the changing position of certain bearings which I had taken, that I was drifting slowly, if almost imperceptibly, southward. I looked upon this as a good omen, and felt sure that the breeze would spring up again before long. My fear now was that it would spring up too soon, the day being far spent, and if the wind rose at sunset, or early in the night, I might

easily be carried over the Phantom City without seeing it. In view of this possibility it would have been better had I delayed my start until there was light of moon. But if I had waited until every circumstance was favourable, and moon, wind, and weather all smiled on me at once, I should probably never have started at all.

When a man engages in a hazardous enterprise he must leave much to Providence and think as little of himself as may be. If he lets his mind dwell on the danger, conjures up difficulties, and tries to provide for every possible contingency, one thing at least is sure—he will not succeed.

So, resigning myself to the inevitable, I hoped for the best; and, seeing no more suspicious specks moving in my direction, watched the sun go down with good courage, wondering where I and my balloon would be the next time I saw him. His disappearance left me in thick darkness. Not a glimmer in the sky—the world blotted out of existence. I peered over the edge of the car, drew back with a shudder, partly from the horror of it, partly from cold—for the air, though serene, was chilly, and I was too far from the earth to benefit by its radiation. The silence was awful. I would have welcomed the din which I had found so trying when benighted in the forest as friendly voices.

Never before had I known what it was to be really alone. I had no companions, seen or unseen. I was a mere waif, drifting between heaven and earth. Again the melancholy mood came over me, and as I sank into

the bottom of the car the intense stillness made me almost weep; but remembering that I was as much one of God's creatures, as entirely in His hands as if I were sitting by my own fireside in far-away dear old England, my mind became more composed. The thought soothed and consoled me; and, covering myself with all the clothes I had, I sank into a deep sleep.

When I awoke the sky was all aglow with myriads of magnificent stars, and the balloon moving rapidly through space—in what direction I was unable precisely to determine, for I could not read my compass and my matches blew out as fast as I struck them, but, judging from the position of the constellations—especially the Southern Cross—almost due south. Amid that scene of more than earthly beauty, so entrancing that I hardly heeded the bitter cold, I sped on until the stars began to pale and the red-rimmed sun rose majestically above the eastern Cordilleras.

I looked eagerly at my compass. I had not been mistaken. The balloon's course was west-sou'-west. How long she had been going at this speed I had no idea. It might be only an hour—a few minutes; but if the wind had freshened soon after I went to sleep it might be seven or eight hours. As, on reference to my barometer, I found that the balloon was at about the same height as before, and the earth seemed considerably lower, I concluded that I had passed the highest ridge of the Cordilleras, for I was now floating over falling but very broken and undulating ground—conical

hills, high table-lands, desolate barrancas, deep valleys, with here and there broad sweeps of savanna, covered for the most part with thick forest. Yet neither sign of human presence, nor the least vestige of the Phantom City.

Could I have passed it? Impossible! But though I tried hard to reassure myself, and it was not probable that I had as yet come near the Phantom country, there was no denying that, during those hours of darkness and sleep, I must have swept over a vast stretch of territory. At any rate, if the wind held, this day must decide my fate. If evening came and brought with it neither sign nor sight of the city there would be no more room for hope.

I used the glass almost continually, removing it only to glance at the compass or barometer; and when the ground seemed to sink I let out gas. So intent was I that, albeit hungry, I did not cease from looking. While I held the glass with one hand I ate with the other.

The hours went on. I glanced at my watch. Nine o'clock. Then the sun reached the zenith. Still no sign. One o'clock. The same. Two. Still no sign. Yet in that clear air, and with my powerful glass, I could see over a great extent of country.

I put my glass down and shut my eyes, partly out of the sickness of heart that comes of hope deferred, partly because they were getting dim with long looking.

I kept my eyes closed fully half-an-hour; then,

trembling with excitement and apprehension—for this was nearly my last hope—I raised my glass slowly, almost reluctantly, and looked again.

“Ah! what is that?”

A gleam as of water over the crest of yonder hills, a score or two of miles to the south. Water it is, sure enough—probably a lake; but if there be anything else I cannot make it out. I am too low, those mountains obstruct the view. I have let out too much gas. A bag of sand overboard. There! I am rising. Still, nothing clearly visible, save a sheet of water in what appears to be a vast plain begirt with hills. I adjust my telescope; it carries farther than the field-glass, but owing to the oscillation of the balloon, is more difficult to manage.

Steadying it on the bight of a rope I take a long look. Yes, a biggish lake, and in the middle of it a large dark object and two or three smaller ones. Islands beyond a doubt. As yet, however, I can see no buildings. But everything else answers to the description of the Cura's Indian. All the same, if there are no buildings——

I lay down the telescope, and try to calm myself; glance at the compass and barometer, and see that the balloon is all right and tight. Then at it again.

Something white seems to emerge from the larger island—the others are mere specks. Something white, glistening in the sun. Buildings or rocks? Too soon to determine, but in all probability the former. As I

draw nearer they grow larger and become more distinctly defined. Yes, buildings without a doubt, but whether perfect or in ruins, peopled or unpeopled, it is impossible to say. Anyhow, I make up my mind to descend; for, if this be not the city of the legend, it either does not exist or is beyond the power of man to discover. And even if the valley is not inhabited I can live there. I will take my chance of getting away.

Rather than miss the opportunity it will be better to go down at once and finish the journey on foot. But on taking the bearings I find that, though the balloon's course is a point or two wide of the island, I shall be able to descend into the valley, without, as I hope, falling into the water.

CHAPTER XVI.

PHANTOMLAND AT LAST.

WHEN I pass over the line of hills which bound the valley to the north assurance becomes doubly sure : their lower slopes are under cultivation and dotted with dwellings, and the lacustrine island is covered with buildings of large size and handsome proportions, which so far bear out the legend that they “glisten like silver in the sun.” The large island seems to be connected with the shore by a chain of islets, and I judge the last to be about sixty or seventy miles in circumference. The surrounding country is green and park-like, interspersed with groups of trees, and appears to be richly cultivated.

But I was thinking less of fair landscapes just then than the navigation of my balloon. I let out gas pretty freely, knowing that in case of need I could rise again by throwing out ballast. My object was to descend as near the city as possible, for I thought I should be likely to meet with a better reception from the authorities than from the rustics, who might make short work both of me and my balloon. As I neared the ground, being only a few yards above the tree-tops, I could see people gesticulating and running about in all directions,

evidently in a state of great excitement. The lake was still some distance off, and as I was getting lower than I liked I threw out ballast, and got my grappling-irons ready.

After carrying on about ten minutes longer I found that I was within a mile of the lake, and as I wanted neither to pass over it nor drop into it, I let out gas again, and when low enough, threw the irons into a grove of cocoa-trees. After tearing away a few branches they held fast, and the balloon brought-to with a shock that nearly threw me out of the car. My aërial voyage was over, and in that balloon at least I did not think I should ever take another. It had served me well, and, so far, I had every reason to consider myself highly favoured by fortune, for there could be little doubt that the island-city was the city which I sought.

I did not get out at once. I waited to see what would happen, for some indication of the disposition of the natives—whether they were likely to treat me as an enemy or receive me as a friend. Several were already gathered before the grove where I had “let go,” and from my “coign of vantage” above the tree-tops I could watch their movements, and might, perchance, guess their intentions.

To judge from their gesticulations and the respectful distance at which they kept themselves, they were both excited and alarmed—and no wonder, if they had never seen a balloon before. I was glad to see they were unarmed, except with the inevitable *machete*,

which, however, is no more a weapon than a sickle or a scythe. But what surprised me most, though, strangely enough, it did not strike me at first, was the whiteness of their skins. I do not mean that the people were as fair as a blonde Englishman, but they were lighter than an average Spaniard. Their complexions were clear, too, and their features more intelligent and refined than those of any Indian people I had met with or heard of. Had it not been for their lank, lustreless locks, I should have thought they were descended from some European or Asiatic stock, but the cylindroidal character of their hair stamped them as belonging to an aboriginal American race. They were broad-set, and seemed short of stature, though as to this I could not be quite sure, while the absence of beard and the lightness of their skins gave them an appearance of comparative youth. Their dress was simple and well suited to the climate—a blouse of unbleached cotton stuff, a bright-coloured belt or sash, probably of the same material, a short kilt, and sandals. Their head-gear consisted of a hat of some light fabric, in shape and general appearance not unlike an Indian pith helmet.

I made these observations—and I thought them highly satisfactory—by means of my field-glass, which, so far as seeing was concerned, brought me within a few feet of the group of bystanders, now fast becoming a crowd. At any rate, I had not fallen among savages.

These people were not only gardeners and husbandmen, they could spin, weave, and dye; and the splendid

edifices which adorned the islands of the lake showed that they knew how to design and build.

But it did not seem as if they knew much about optics, for every time I raised the glass to my eyes, or took it away, there was a shout of astonishment; but curiosity was beginning to get the better of fear—if fear there was—and the men—for, so far as I could make out, none of the softer sex were present—drew nearer, many of the bolder spirits coming quite close to the tree to which I had grappled the balloon.

How could I offer them a token of amity? I thought of waving my pocket-handkerchief, but it was hardly to be expected that this primitive folk would understand the meaning of a flag of truce. I hit upon a much happier idea. I charged my pipe, lighted it with a tinder and steel apparatus such as is sold by English tobacconists, and began to smoke.

Another shout, followed by some laughter, whereupon several of the Phantoms produced pipes of their own, and, nodding at me in a friendly way, filled them; and, a bit of live charcoal being obtained, I knew not how, we joined in smoking the calumet of peace. At any rate, this was the construction I put upon the proceeding, and, thinking the occasion opportune for making a more decided move, I let down a couple of ropes, and, twisting them round my legs sailor fashion, slid down to firm earth.

The Phantoms started back in surprise, probably not unmixed with dismay, much as a crowd of English

rustics might do if a gigantic Zulu were to drop down among them from the sky. Not that my height is extraordinary—I stand six feet one in my stockings—but, compared with these people, the tallest of whom was not more than five feet six, I was almost a giant. Then they had long black hair and bare faces; my hair was short, curly, and chestnut, and I was bearded like the pard. Altogether the difference between us was so striking that they might well suppose I belonged to another world, if I had not actually descended from the stars.

When I thought we had stared at each other long enough, I quietly re-charged my pipe and lit it with a lucifer. The striking of the match caused great wonderment, and drew forth many expressions of surprise. Then I went a little closer to them, gracefully waving my pipe by way of greeting—a sign to which the men nearest me responded by laying their right hands on the ground and then on their heads. I did likewise, after which we stared at each other again.

They were evidently a kindly, good-natured folk, these Phantoms—nothing ferocious or savage either in their attitude or their faces. I wanted to open a conversation with them. The difficulty was what to say or how to begin. I had made myself fairly proficient in Mayan, and knew something of Quiché, the root languages of Central America, but they are split up into such a multitude of dialects that I felt great doubt, even supposing these people spoke a kindred tongue, whether

they could understand me, or I them. Aboriginal Indian languages are all, I believe, hyposynthetic, like the bill of the English farrier, who wrote, "shooinyer-greyoss—atakinonimomeagin;" that is to say, a phrase is a word: broken up it becomes meaningless. They are destitute alike of inflections and concrete forms. I did not know that the Phantom language possessed these characteristics, but I thought that very likely it did, and, concluding it would be best to start the palaver as simply as might be, I said, in my best Mayan, and pointing to my pipe—

"I smoke the pipe of peace." Then, pointing to the smokers, "You smoke the pipe of peace."

They did not seem to understand, so I repeated the observation, speaking very slowly and distinctly. On this they smiled pleasantly and nodded intelligently, from which I inferred that if they did not understand my language they, at any rate, divined my thoughts. They said something in return, which, albeit I was unable to make out, sounded very like Mayan, and referred, I felt sure, to eating or drinking.

I bowed, and answered in the Mayan affirmative, for I felt both hungry and thirsty.

This time I was understood without difficulty. Everybody smiled, and one of the Phantoms, stepping out of the ranks, signified that he would like to take me somewhere. I followed him without hesitation. He led me to an opening among the trees a few score yards away, where stood a little house, built of sun-dried bricks

and thatched with the leaves of the *maguey* (Mexican aloe), a splendid specimen of which, with its clustering pyramids of flowers towering above their coronal-like leaves, threw its graceful shade over the cottage.

My conductor, after courteously inviting me by word and gesture to seat myself on a bench under the aloe-tree, went into the house, whence he presently returned, followed by two girls, each carrying a wooden platter, on one of which were two wooden cups, on the other a pile of cakes.

These being the first female Phantoms I had seen, I regarded them with much curiosity. Though their cheek-bones were rather high and their foreheads rather low, they were by no means uncomely, and their expression was amiable and good-humoured. They were relatively tall, almost as tall as the men, seemed physically nearly as strong, and their skin, except where it had been bronzed by the sun, was as white as that of a blonde European. The dress of these maidens consisted of a loose-fitting jacket or bodice of quilted calico, laced in front with scarlet cord, and a skirt of the same material reaching a little below the knee. Their shapely legs and well-formed feet were innocent of shoes and stockings. Their hair, drawn back from the forehead, was done up in a bunch and fastened with a pair of silver skewers, while round their necks were strung ornaments in gold and bone, which I believe were charms.

I have said that I looked at these feminine Phantoms curiously. They returned my glances with interest, but

more in fear than curiosity. If I had been a veritable phantom, fresh from the invisible world, they could not have shown more apprehension. When I rose and stretched out my arm to take one of the cups, their trepidation increased. The younger girl fairly turned tail and ran towards the house. The father—for such I took my conductor to be—laughed heartily, and shouted something which I did not understand; whereupon the fugitive came back, and, still eyeing me furtively, handed me a cup of what I found to be delicious chocolate. The cakes were of maize, and very eatable.

I expressed my thanks, both by word and sign, and the girls, seeing that I ate and drank like a creature of flesh and blood, gathered confidence, and watched me with great interest. What seemed most to strike them were my hairy face and tall stature. Inferring from their manner and a few phrases which I partially understood that they doubted whether my beard was a part of my dress or a part of myself, I gave it a good tug, and signed to them to do the same. After a good deal of hesitation they laughingly complied, yet very cautiously withal, as if they were pulling the whiskers of a sleeping tiger. Seeing, however, that I neither bit nor scratched, they grew bolder, and pulled so hard that I winced, and said “Oh!” whereupon they laughed again. A touch of nature makes us all akin. We were thenceforth on the most friendly footing possible, and the fair Phantoms pushed their investigation to the length of

feeling what there was beneath the beard, being evidently under the impression that the purpose of the adornment might be to conceal the absence of chin and lips.

Our philandering was interrupted by a shout from the bystanders, who had been amused spectators of the scene. They were talking earnestly and pointing to the lake. Looking in the same direction, I saw two large boats, each manned by some half-dozen rowers, making rapidly for the nearest strand, which was only a few hundred yards from the cottage. When the boats took ground the crews jumped out, formed in military order, and, headed by one who appeared to be in authority, came on at a rapid swinging pace, which spoke well for their marching powers. All had bows slung at their backs, sheaves of arrows at their girdles, and each man was further armed with spear and shield.

The officer in command of the party was much more richly and picturesquely attired than the peasants among whom I had fallen. His helmet-shaped hat was covered with plates of gold, his tunic embroidered with beautiful feather-work, and his kilt adorned with bronze and silver rings. His arms were a spear and a slender gold-hilted sword, so slender indeed as to suggest that it was intended rather for ornament than use.

As touching his person, this Phantom gentleman was about five and a half feet high, and somewhat slightly built; in complexion he was fairer than the peasants around me, and his hands and feet (he wore

sandals, no stockings) were as small and delicate as those of a woman.

When he came opposite the aloe-tree I rose, and, drawing myself to my full height, looked him straight in the face. Though I could see that he was as much surprised by my appearance as the others had been, he returned my look without flinching, and, after a moment's hesitation, saluted me, by putting his hand on the ground and then on his head. I returned the greeting in the same fashion, not without a sense of satisfaction; for, though I knew nothing of Phantom etiquette, I had an idea—which subsequent observation confirmed—that by giving the first salute the officer virtually acknowledged me as his superior.

That he was come to arrest me I had not the slightest doubt, and I had no intention of offering resistance—my only way of getting on with these people was to make friends of them—but I thought it good policy to show a firm front, and let them see that I expected to be treated with “distinguished consideration.”

The saluting over, the officer said something which I made out to be an inquiry as to who I was, whence I came, and what I wanted. At any rate, if he did not say this he ought to have done. I answered in Mayan that I was a traveller from the rising sun (pointing to the east), and wanted to see the Phantom City (pointing towards the island). He seemed puzzled—pretty much as a man does when he is trying to guess a hard riddle—but I thought he understood me better than the

rustics had done. I marked that at the words "rising sun" he bowed, and when I said "the city where Phantoms dwell" he smiled. I found afterwards that it was part of the Phantom religion to bow whenever the sun was mentioned.

The officer replied in a little speech, of which I understood precious little, but his gestures were so expressive that I could not mistake his meaning. He wanted me to go with him. But as I had a decided objection to going without my kit I pointed to my balloon, and, without waiting for an answer, led the way in that direction. He and his men followed closely after, and, if I had increased my speed much, it is more than likely that I should have the points of their spears in the small of my back.

But I walked with great deliberation. When we reached the cocoa-tree I took hold of the ropes by which I had come down, began to pull, and signified that I should like a little help in the operation. It was forthcoming at once, and in a few minutes we had the car of the balloon on a level with the ground. I detached it, and made the officer understand that I would like the car, with all it contained, to be carried down to the boat. He said a few words to his men, whereupon five or six of them raised the basket on their heads and walked solemnly with it to the boats, the officer and myself bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER XVII.

IXTIL: LORD OF LIGHT.

I TOOK my seat in the stern, near the officer, who took the tiller, which was simply a paddle pierced with a hole near the handle and moving on a wooden pin. The planks forming the canoe-shaped boat were fastened with wooden pins, and as I had seen no sign of iron of any description, I concluded that the most useful of the metals was either unknown or little used in Phantom-land. The oars were paddles cut in two—a proof that the art of rowing had been only recently acquired—and nearly all the boats we met or passed were either canoe-shaped or real canoes, and propelled in the ordinary Indian fashion.

Now that I was in it, the country looked much larger than it had looked from the balloon, when it was contrasted with the vast region round about. So did the lake, which seemed to empty itself into a river at the lower or southern end of the valley, where it was closed by a rugged volcanic peak, from whose summit rose a thick, dark line of smoke. I fancied it was the same which I had seen from the balloon.

The banks of the lake were extremely picturesque. Great trees, conspicuous among which was the graceful

corypha palm, and flowering shrubs, bent over its white sands and blue waters, while fields of yellow maize, interspersed with groves of aloe, cocoa, and coffee trees, and dotted with farm-houses, stretched to the base of the mountains and climbed half-way up their slopes. The flora was that of the *tierra templada*, the valley being nearly four thousand feet above the level of the sea—a fortunate circumstance for the Phantoms, as, though the soil was fertile and the climate genial, they could not well have lived without regular labour and systematic agriculture.

I observed with surprise that many of the houses were built over the lake, resting on piles, like the ancient lacustrine villages of Central Europe with which the researches of Swiss antiquaries have made us familiar. I found out afterwards that the lines of islets which extended from the island to either bank were equally artificial. But though inhabited, their most important office was to serve as links in a causeway, each islet being united to its fellow by a suspension bridge, sufficiently high to admit of the passage of boats.

Though the oars were clumsy, the Phantom boatmen handled them with great dexterity, and an hour's pulling brought us to the north end of the island. So far as I could judge, it was about three miles long, and from one to two broad, in shape almost oval, and indented with bays and inlets. The lower part was covered with luxuriant vegetation, flower-gardens, and noble trees; the higher part, which rose well-nigh five hundred feet above the

level of the lake, was crowned with stately buildings, chief of which were three pyramidal towers not unlike the one I had seen at the ruins in the forest. The tallest, as I afterwards learned, was the observatory. Near it were the ruins of an ancient fort, almost hidden under a mass of verdure; and several imposing edifices which I took to be temples and palaces. Built of huge unpolished blocks of beautiful white stone, they literally shone like frosted silver, and, when viewed from a distance, their appearance might well give rise to the idea that they were covered with plates of the precious metal. The roofs were flat, and the façades and entablatures elaborately carved into strange shapes and grotesque images, among which were figures of beasts and birds, and monstrous and hideous human faces.

The Phantom City was Palenque, Uxmal, Chichen-Itza, or the ruins in the forest, restored, or as they would be had they never fallen into decay.

The boats were moored to a wooden jetty, and we were received by an officer not above five feet three inches high, whose tunic and kilt seemed to be made almost entirely of feather-work, and whose sword was suspended to a sort of baldrick composed of alternate plates of gold and bronze. His manner was highly dignified, and his silver-grey hair gave him a decidedly European appearance. It would have required no great effort of imagination to believe that he was an actor, "got up" for playing a part in an opera or a comedy.

After exchanging a few words with my conductor, he

saluted me in the manner I have already described ; and when I had returned the courtesy he pointed towards the city, which was almost immediately above us, and led the way up a broad flight of steps, winding among groves of pepper and vanilla myrtles, orange and rose trees, and over ground mantled with a profusion of creeping plants, whose emerald verdure might vie with the greenest of English meadows.

Ten minutes' easy walking brought us to the outskirts of the city—a city, however, in the European sense of the word, it could hardly be considered. There were paths and roads—the latter in singularly good order—but no streets, the houses being scattered about, seemingly at haphazard, some perched on terraces or half-hidden in groves, others nestling in hollows ; yet the general effect was singularly striking and picturesque. The smaller dwellings were built of red pine or (as I guessed) mahogany and rosewood, and thatched with *maquey* leaves ; the larger, of grey-white stone, flat-roofed, with interior courts, where grew shrubs and flower-trees in rich profusion. The principal entrances were in every case wide, without door or gate, and arched, the crowns being obtuse, and the sides zig-zagged, like steps upside down.

Nearly at the top of the hill rose a vast edifice, built on a natural platform of rock, to which access was gained by a flight of a hundred steps, each eighty feet wide. In front of it was a noble colonnade, supporting a cyclopean entablature, covered with strange

figures and mysterious devices in relief. The pillars of the colonnade were square, each being composed of several enormous stones.

Up the steps went my guide—I with him—the other officers and the men-at-arms following with the car containing my belongings.

There were four principal entrances, two wide and spacious, flanked by two others which, though large, were somewhat smaller. We went in by one of the latter; and after passing through a great hall and several lofty corridors, came to a room which, for a moment, I thought was a sculpture gallery. On either side of a doorway, curtained with a piece of variegated matting, stood a line of nearly nude figures, each holding a spear and a shield, and so still and motionless that they might well have been mistaken for inanimate figures.

To one of these statues my conductor spoke a few words in an under-tone; whereupon all wakened to life, and, raising their shields by a single movement, struck them simultaneously with their spears, then subsided once more into statuesque stillness.

The echo of this martial yet not unmusical clash had hardly died away when an answering ring, like a single stroke on a silver bell, came from beyond the screen. On this the officer, drawing aside the matting, beckoned me forward. I went forward accordingly, and found myself in a moderately large apartment, the walls of which were hung with arras of feather-work, and the floor carpeted with puma and jaguar skins.

At a large table, in the middle of this room, sat a man with one of the most remarkable faces I ever beheld. Fair as a European, his broad forehead, aquiline nose, and square jaws, bespoke both high intelligence and a powerful will. His rather deep-sunken eyes were dark and piercing, yet neither hard nor cruel, and when he smiled his expression was benevolent and winning. In the middle of his forehead was tattooed a star, surmounted by the emblem of a lighted torch. His black hair was beginning to assume the peculiar silvery hue which among aboriginal American races is the mark of advancing years; but his general appearance was that of a man comparatively young and in the prime of life.

My companion, who followed closely after me, removed his helmet, touched the ground with one knee and one hand, and then, still stooping, laid the latter on his head. The personage at the table acknowledged the obeisance with an almost imperceptible nod. Acting on the principle I had already laid down for myself, I merely doffed my hat and bowed. The personage, looking, however, rather surprised, bowed in return; and, after putting a question to me which I did not understand, put several to the officer, which, I need hardly say, I found equally incomprehensible, and talked with him several minutes.

Then he spoke to me again. I answered him in Mayan, as I had answered the officer at the farmhouse.

The personage listened with great attention, and, I thought, understood much of what I said. He seemed pleased, pointed to a hieroglyphic manuscript on the table, and then, taking a small brush, drew with a few rapid strokes a man and a small boy, the former holding up his hand, the latter opening his mouth.

There was no difficulty in understanding this. I answered in Mayan—

“Teach a child to talk.”

The personage smiled again, and I gathered that he meant to teach me, or have me taught, the Phantom language. I wanted nothing better. On this the little officer put in a word, and, at a sign from the personage, the screen was drawn aside, and the men-at-arms, who had been waiting outside, brought in the car.

The personage, or—to give him his right name and title, Ixtil, the Lord of Light—inspected its contents with great interest. I respectfully presented him with a many-bladed knife, one of several which I had brought with me, and the telescope. If the former pleased him, the latter charmed him beyond measure. I had some trouble in adjusting the focus to his sight, but when everything was in order, and he had taken a look at the boats on the lake, and the trees and houses on its banks, he could hardly speak for surprise, so far forgetting his dignity as to clap his hands and make other rather effusive demonstrations of astonishment and delight.

After amusing himself in this way for a short time, he pointed skyward and then touched the star on his

forehead, by which I understood him to ask whether the telescope could be used for viewing the heavenly bodies. When I answered in the affirmative, he seemed quite overjoyed, and offered me his hand, as I presumed, in token of his royal favour. If I had been as conversant with Phantom court etiquette as I subsequently became I should have bowed low and pressed the hand to my forehead ; but in my ignorance I gave it a hearty shake, in the fashion of my country—a proceeding which seemed to take the Cacique* quite aback, and so horrified the little officer that I thought he would have expired on the spot.

While this was going on another personage appeared on the scene—a short, squat, square-shouldered man, clad in a robe somewhat resembling a Roman toga, which left his arms and legs bare. Suspended round his neck by a gold chain was a massive green stone, probably jade or nephrite, on which were engraven queer-looking signs and mysterious symbols. To say that he was ill-favoured would be paying him an unmerited compliment. Eyes so deep-sunken as to be hardly visible, no forehead worth mentioning, a broad, flat nose, sallow skin, huge mouth, undershot lip, and great serrated teeth, made him positively hideous. Had he been a little shorter he would have made a capital model

* I use this word (of Haytian origin) merely because it is the generally received designation of an American prince ; but Ixtil was always addressed by his people as the Lord of Light, and, like every other Phantom, invariably spoke of himself in the third person.

for the Demon Dwarf of Victor Hugo's celebrated romance.

This Caliban—I may as well introduce him at once, though I had not as yet the pleasure of his acquaintance—was Cochitemi, high-priest of the Temple of the Sun.

He looked at me with an evil eye, and, after making the usual obeisance, addressed himself to the Cacique. I had not the least doubt that I was the subject of his remarks, and I felt instinctively that they boded me no good. He seemed to be urging on Ixtil some course of action which the latter refused to adopt, for the Cacique's countenance lowered, and he answered the priest firmly, almost angrily.

After some further conversation Cochitemi left the presence, looking as black as thunder and as ugly as the night.

Ixtil, who seemed annoyed, and, I thought, a little troubled, beckoned me to him, showed me the picture of the man and boy, also another of a man eating, and of a hammock, and, pointing to the officer, gave him an order. Then he waved his hand towards the screen, and said a few more words to the officer, whom he addressed as Coxoh.

This signified that the audience was over, and that I was to be the Cacique's guest, and begin my education forthwith.

So we took our leave, and, after a bewildering walk through many passages, arrived before another screen,

which my companion drew aside with scant ceremony, and ushered me into a room where a dim-eyed old gentleman sat reading a large scroll covered with hieroglyphics. This was Melchora—a great scholar, and one of the Cacique's secretaries, to whom Coxoh introduced me in due form, and communicated his master's commands—at any rate I presumed so. Then he made the usual salute, and left us to ourselves.

He had not been gone long when two servitors entered the room, carrying on two platters a dish of deliciously-cooked fish, on the other yams, fried bananas, pineapples, and avocada pears, to which they called my attention, and to which, being by this time half famished, I did ample justice.

As I was finishing my repast the screen was again drawn aside, and four soldiers entered with the car. I looked inside and found everything intact.

The Cacique is a gentleman, I thought; and so he proved.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAIDEN TRIBUTE.

MELCHORA was a sort of Phantom Mezzofanti. No man in the country knew so many Indian dialects as he, and when there came to the city forest Indians who could not make themselves understood, he was always called upon to interpret. Though a priest of the order of the sun, Melchora "occupied no position in the church," his time being entirely taken up with his secretarial duties and linguistic and historic researches. He had a fine collection of ancient manuscripts, and could read hieroglyphics which even to his brethren of the craft were insoluble enigmas. He knew nothing of Mayan, but his knowledge of cognate idioms enabled him to understand much that I said, and so to express himself that after a little practice I could make out what he meant.

Under Melchora's tuition I made rapid progress in Phantom. My principal difficulties were the differences in pronounciation between Phantom and Mayan, and the fact that, despite their undoubted kinship, the former was so much the more developed of the two. It had passed the hyposynthetical stage, possessed many inflections, lent itself readily to the expression of abstract

ideas, and was altogether a rich and not unmusical tongue. But it is surprising how quickly you can learn a language if you do nothing else, and are forced either to make yourself understood in it or be dumb. My hammock was slung in Melchora's room. I was almost continually with him, and every day he had in two or three children, with whom I romped and chatted; and by listening to their prattle, and saying the same thing over and over again, I soon acquired considerable facility of expression.

Every day, moreover, I paid a visit to the Cacique, who seemed well satisfied with my progress, to which he effectually contributed, for, being naturally quick of apprehension, he helped me when I stuck fast, often grasping the meaning of my broken sentences before they were well out of my mouth.

Ixtil was a man of inquiring mind, and so soon as we could fairly understand each other, I had to give a full account of myself—whence I came, why I had come to the Phantom City, how I contrived to navigate the air, and much else.

I told him frankly the essential parts of my story, and rather to my surprise I found it easier to make the Cacique understand how a balloon could be made to float in the air than the curiosity which had prompted a man who had all the world to roam in, to undergo so many perils and privations in order to see his remote and insignificant principality. Anything relating to science interested him greatly, and I had little difficulty

in explaining to him the use and nature of my thermometer, barometer, and sextant, as well as the mechanism of my watch.

About astronomy Ixtil knew more than I did. The three pyramids I have mentioned were built expressly for astronomical and astrological purposes: the Phantoms' arrangement of time was decidedly more scientific and complex than that which prevails in Christian countries, and they had remedies in their pharmacopœia; which I deeply regret that circumstances have not yet permitted me to place at the disposal of my English colleagues.

I am now merely describing my adventures. I reserve for another and more serious work an account of the history, religion, mythology, social economy, and political organisation of this remarkable people; yet in order to make my readers understand my position in Phantomland, and the events that afterwards came to pass, I am compelled to bring to their knowledge a few facts which, though they concern my narrative only indirectly, will, I trust, prove not uninteresting.

Let me say, then, that, after frequent conversations with Ixtil and Melchora and reading some of the latter's hieroglyphic codices, I came to the conclusion that the Phantoms were an offshoot of that mysterious Toltec race which, after extending its sway over the remotest borders of Anahuac, and raising wonderful temples and cities in nearly every part of Central America, silently disappeared and its places knew it

no more. The Aztec invasion completed their ruin, and those of them who did not perish in the struggle became either the slaves or the concubines of their conquerors. Some, however, took refuge in the forests and mountains, which are still haunted by their savage and degenerate, yet unsubdued descendants, to whom were no doubt afterwards added a number of Aztec fugitives from the cruelty and oppression of the Spanish invaders.

A chosen few, probably belonging to the higher and more cultured classes of the Toltec nation, after long wandering in the wilderness, reached the land which I had discovered, and founded the state of which Ixtil was the lord.

This, however, was not the orthodox theory. According to the story promulgated by the priests and believed by the people, they were descended from the Sun God, who sent two of his progeny down to the valley for the express purpose of becoming the first parents of the race. The Phantoms were thus, as they thought, really and in very fact Children of Light, and the country where they dwelt was known among themselves and the wild Indians of the forest as the Land of Light. They worshipped the sun as their father and creator, adored light in every shape as an emanation from him, and the moon and all other heavenly bodies as his satellites and servants.

Fire, however, unless kindled directly or indirectly by the sun, they regarded as maleficent; it was produced and controlled by the demon gods of the nether

world, who, unless propitiated in a way I shall presently describe, would utterly destroy the Children of Light before the Sun God could come to their help.

On the island were three great temples dedicated respectively to the sun, the moon, and the stars, and a fourth which was known as the Temple of the Cross. According to tradition the last was specially dedicated to the group of stars popularly known in Europe as the Southern Cross, but it had more probably its origin in the tree and serpent worship practised by nearly every primitive people, the cross in this case being merely the rude representation of a tree. This idea was confirmed by the fact that round one of the crosses sculptured on the walls of the temple was entwined the figure of a gigantic snake.

Ixtil was too enlightened to place much faith in these legends. He knew that the stars and planets were not the satellites of the sun, and though he believed in a Great Spirit, he did not believe that the sun was a god or that demon deities haunted the lower world; but he had very good reason for keeping his scepticism to himself, and his real sentiments were known only to a few of his intimates, among whom I had soon the honour to be numbered.

Though in theory an absolute ruler, the Cacique enjoyed little more real power than if he had been the chief of a limited monarchy. He had to defer continually to the pretensions of the priests and the superstitions of his people, for religion was a great influence in the

Phantom State. In the time of Ixtil's grandfather the church was everything, the Cacique the merest figure-head; but Moqui, the Cacique in question, a man of great energy and independence of character, after a long and severe contest, succeeded in partly freeing himself from sacerdotal fetters, and his son and grandson followed without flinching the example he had set them.

But the servants of the sun, moon, and stars (as the priests called themselves), so far from accepting their defeat with resignation, were continually striving to regain their former power and revive the rites and ceremonies which the three reforming Caciques had modified or abolished. The leader of the reactionary party was Cochitemi, whom, though Ixtil cordially detested, he did not think it politic openly to defy.

One of these demands was for the re-establishment of human sacrifices on something like their former scale, for though the Toltec ritual was never so sanguinary as that of the Aztecs, there had been a time when men and women were slaughtered on the altars of Phantom temples. But the Children of Light not being of a cruel disposition, the sacrifices were gradually abolished—all save one, which Ixtil and his father had, however, striven to render as little revolting as circumstances permitted. This was the propitiatory rite which I have already mentioned, and therein, though I knew it not, was involved my own fate and that of Ixtil himself.

According to the doctrine taught by the priests, the tenure by the Phantoms of their country, their very

existence even, was contingent on the yearly sacrifice to the fire demon of that which they held most precious.

This precious object was declared by sacred tradition to be a maiden of high degree and marriageable age.

Above the altar of every temple in Phantomland was painted in hieroglyphic characters a legend which may be freely Englished as follows :—

“When Light the tribute fails to give,
The sun-born race shall cease to live.”

And except Ixtil and a few others, nobody doubted that if the rite should be omitted the penalty would be required.

The old method of sacrifice was to throw the living victim into the crater of the volcano at the foot of the lake. But when Ixtil became Cacique one of his first acts was to ordain that she should first be put to death in a way I shall have occasion to describe later on. As it was firmly believed that the least departure from the prescribed ritual would be punished by a destructive outbreak of the volcano, this proceeding naturally caused considerable commotion among both priests and people; but as no evil consequences had so far come to pass, the popular discontent was gradually subsiding, and had it not been kept alive by Cochitemi and his party, the innovation would have met with general acquiescence.

I am by no means sure, however, that in the course he took the Cacique was influenced by merely sentimental

considerations. Notwithstanding the serenity of his temper and the mildness of his rule, it never struck me that he had any great sympathy for suffering or respect for human life. But according to the tradition in question, sanctioned by the practice of ages, it was imperative for the sacrifice to be made by the Cacique himself, and without having very fine feelings, Ixtil may well have had a personal dislike for a function which involved throwing a young girl, bound hand and foot, headlong into the crater of a volcano. This, and a desire to score a triumph over the priests, were doubtless his principal motives for venturing to modify a rite on which his own life and the very existence of the Phantom State were believed to depend.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CACIQUE'S PROMISE.

THE victim for sacrifice was not selected from the people at large, but in order, I suppose, to comply with the condition of preciousness, from the twenty or thirty families known as the Children of the Caciques, all of whom were descended from former ruling princes, and who constituted the nobility of the country. But out of consideration for the Cacique, who had himself to perform the function, his own family could only be required to furnish a victim in the hitherto unheard-of, yet not impossible, event of there being in none of the other princely families a girl with the necessary qualifications—that is to say, one who had completed her sixteenth year, and was free from bodily infirmity.

The selection was made by lot.

The annual slaughter of an innocent child in deference to a cruel and stupid superstition, horrified me exceedingly; and when Ixtil began to take me into his confidence and consult me, not only as to matters of science, but touching affairs of state, one of the first things I did was to beseech him to abolish the rite altogether.

“That is something like asking Ixtil to abolish him-

self, and very likely the Land of Light, too," said the Cacique, with a smile.

"You surely do not believe," I exclaimed, "that there can be any possible connection between the quiescence of the volcano and the throwing into it of a poor child's body! Volcanoes are the outlet of underground fires, and their activity or otherwise can no more be influenced by what we do or say than the rising or setting of the sun."

"That is all very true. The legend is an old wife's tale, like most of our priestly lore, and if you can prevail on the Children of Light and the wild men of the woods to think as you think, Ixtil will set the priests at defiance and do as you desire."

"The wild men of the woods! What have they to do with it?"

"Ah, wise stranger from the east, you have seen many things that Ixtil will never behold, and know much that he will never learn, but you are not the Lord of Light, and know not the difficulties with which he has to contend. The wild men of the woods count for much in his calculations; if he be not prudent they may become his most dangerous enemies, and are more to be feared than Cochitemi and his fellow-priests, even if they should do their worst."

"But I thought these wild men of the woods, the Choles, Manches, Lacandonos, Iztaes, and the rest, were friends and allies, and guarded the Land of Light from the intrusion of enemies and strangers?"

“It is true, and the City of Light is to them a sacred city. At the festival of the Sun God and the propitiatory rite they flock here in thousands, and worship devoutly in our temples. But our hold over them is entirely religious, and any material alteration of our rites and ceremonies they would fiercely resent. If Ixtil should abolish the sacrifice, as you desire, his power over them would be gone; they would despise him, and, with the help of the priests, set up another in his place. This Cochitemi knows, and it is the secret of his strength.”

“But your own people, Cacique, would they not stand by you: they seem docile, submissive, and loyal?”

“It is true. Yes, Ixtil's people are good; but the docility you so much admire is his chief difficulty. Their lives are easy and peaceful; they have lost the habit of warfare, and in a fight with the fierce men of the woods would go down like ripe corn before the reaper. True, Ixtil's guards would stand by him to the death, but they are very few. To abolish the rite would not only cost him his life but restore the priesthood to the position they occupied in the time of the Cuzcucano, and instead of one human sacrifice a year there would be twenty. Ixtil does not think that it would be the part of a wise ruler to buy at so great a price the lives of a few girls. They die for their country; what can they do better?”

This closed the discussion; yet, though I did not

think I should do much good, I resolved to renew the subject whenever a favourable occasion should present itself.

In the meanwhile I broached another subject which had been long on my mind, and in which I took even a greater interest than in the sacrificial rite—the fate of my lost friends. I had already given the Cacique an account of my adventures in the forest, and I now asked him if he thought it was possible that Wildfell and the others were still alive.”

“Possible, perhaps, but not very likely,” was the answer. “Our savage allies make it a rule to let no stranger whatever come near the Land of Light, and you are the only one who has succeeded in reaching our country. For we know, and they know, that our safety depends on our isolation. They know that if Christians were allowed to come here with their civilisation and their creed, our race would perish and our religion be destroyed. Tales of Spanish cruelty and oppression have reached us even here. No wonder, then, that the wild men kill all strangers whom they find in their territory—and they do quite right. Still, they do sometimes make slaves of their captives, instead of putting them to death, and it is just possible that your friends still live.”

“I should like much, very much, to know if they do,” I said eagerly.

“And if they do, what then?”

“I should like to see them, to have them brought

here," I answered, greatly surprised that the Cacique should ask such a question.

"You would! Ixtil is not sure that you would be doing right. However, you are a wise man, and these men are your friends, and you are his friend—and, yes, he will cause inquiries to be made. Two moons hence the festival of the Sun God will be celebrated; the wild people will flock hither from all the winds, and Melchora, the scribe, and Yaqui, the captain of the royal guard, shall ask many questions on your behalf. It may be that they will hear something of these wanderers—whether they are alive or dead—and then we shall see. Tell Ixtil, as exactly as you can, whereabouts lay these ruins of which you speak. There are many such vestiges of the vanished greatness of our race between the smoking mountain and the great river."

I answered the question to the best of my ability, illustrating my description with a rough sketch of the route I had taken and the region I had traversed.

"How many days' journey are the ruins from the point where you first sighted the river?" asked the Cacique.

"Eight."

"That is the time you took. A man of the woods, familiar with the country, would probably reckon it at no more than four days. And the people who carried off your friends were Choles, you say?"

"I believe so. At any rate, Pedro, our Indian guide, said we were in the Chole country at the time;

but, as he was never there before, he may possibly have been mistaken."

"They were more probably Iztaes. But strict inquiry shall be made, and after the festival of the Sun god Ixtil may have news for you."

This conversation made me put on my considering cap. I began to think that the Cacique knew more about the fate of my friends and our abortive expedition than he chose to avow. What did he mean? Why had he hinted that if they were still alive they had better stay where they were? How could their condition become worse by exchanging slavery among savages for freedom in the Land of Light? Or had Ixtil some secret motive for desiring them not to join me?

But, be the reading of the riddle what it might, my duty was clear. Wildfell and the others had lost their liberty in my service, and if, as seemed probable, they still lived, I was bound by every consideration of honour and humanity to attempt their rescue, even though in doing so I should lose my own life. Yet, until I knew more, I could make no move whatever.

There was nothing for it but to wait until Ixtil had found out and thought fit to tell me. In the meanwhile my best policy was to spare no pains to keep up our present friendly relations, and, if possible, increase my hold over him. In this I did not think there would be any great difficulty, for, as the Lord of Light frankly admitted, he found me very useful and had a great liking for my company. On the other hand, I could

not disguise from myself that, in the long run, his partiality might not be altogether to my advantage. Phantomland interested me much, and I was anxious to make a thorough study of the singular people among whom my lot had been cast. But I had no idea of staying among them for the term of my natural life, and I feared that when I wanted to leave, the Cacique might not be willing to let me go. The more useful I made myself the greater would be his reluctance to lose me, and without his consent it would be difficult to get away. The balloon was no longer available. True, Ixtil had sent for it to the village where I descended, and it was now in the palace; but I could not put it together, make gas and the rest, without his knowledge; the mere proposal of such a thing would be sufficient to rouse his suspicion, and, unless I misread his character, he would not hesitate a moment to take such measures as would render my departure impossible. For I could not hope to hoodwink the Lord of Light as I had hoodwinked the *corregidor* of Peten, and Ixtil, though he had so far been kindness itself, possessed an acute mind and a strong will, and knew how to make himself obeyed.

As for going away secretly and alone, that was out of the question. It would be going to certain death. Better remain in Phantomland until my head was white than fall into the hands of the wild men of the woods. And then it struck me that I was looking too far ahead. Short views of life are, after all, the best. People who take too much thought for the morrow not

only embitter their lives with imaginary cares, but fail in their purpose, since the eventualities for which they provide are generally those which do not come to pass. I should be quite content to remain in Phantomland twelve or eighteen months longer. In that time much might happen. I had, fortunately, few kinsfolk at home—none whom my disappearance was likely to distress; and I had particularly requested Dominick not to count me as dead until he knew I had ceased to live.

CHAPTER XX.

A SHOCK FOR COCHITEMI.

IN the meanwhile I had no reason to complain of my lot, and if I could have reconciled myself to a life-long exile I might have done worse than make the Land of Light my permanent home. The climate was delicious, for though the heat at noonday was often intense, the mornings and evenings, owing to the height of the valley above the level of the sea, were delightfully cool, while frequent, albeit not heavy, rains spared the Phantoms the infliction of a rainy season. The trees were always green, the crops always growing.

Imagine an unusually warm English June, refreshed with nightly showers and following a forward spring, and you may form some idea of the climate of the Land of Light—a climate where spring was perpetual and winter unknown, where flowers were always in bloom and fruit always ripe, where men reaped and sowed on the same day, and where, though the husbandman could not live without labour, he never failed to receive his reward or the earth to yield its increase.

A perfect climate, some may say; yet for my own part I would rather live in a country where weather and temperature are rather less monotonous. You may have

too much even of a good thing, and I remained long enough in the tropics to sympathise with the British sailor who, after cruising several years in southern latitudes, expressed an ardent wish to go home, "if only to get away from the confounded blue sky."

So far, however, my life in the Land of Light had been very pleasant, and my enjoyment of the climate was enhanced by the novelty of my position and the strangeness of my surroundings. I rose every morning with the sun, and, after drinking a cup of delicious chocolate, I would walk down to the lake and have a long swim in its pellucid waters. Then back again to the palace, breakfast, and study a few hours with Melchora. At noon siesta, and in the afternoon I was generally sent for by the Cacique, with whom I had long and interesting talks, in the course of which I obtained much information about himself and his people.

The Phantoms were, in many respects, an ideal community. They had neither judges, lawyers, nor prisons, and knew no more of criminal codes than of cold weather.

"How do you deal with people who take what does not belong to them?" I asked the Cacique on one of these occasions. (The Phantoms have no word for thief.)

"Ixtil's people never do take what does not belong to them," answered the Lord of Light, with a look of surprise. "Why should they? Everybody has all he requires—food, shelter, clothing; what can a man want more?"

“Money.”

“Money ! We have none.”

It was quite true. The Phantoms did not use money, and the little trade that existed was conducted by barter. But as by far the greater part of the population lived on the land, and as all the peasant families spun and wove their own clothing and made their own garments, it was very seldom they wanted anything which they did not produce at home. The houses were mostly of wood, thatched with *maguey* leaves ; the men were their own builders, and, in case of need, neighbours were always ready to lend a helping hand.

Masons, gold and silver smiths, and other artificers were maintained by the State, and the national revenue was derived from contributions in kind made by the cultivators of the soil. The articles they produced were exchanged for cocoa, coffee, or maize, which was stored, until needed, in public warehouses. The gold and silver and tin and copper mines in the mountains were worked by the State on the same system. Iron, the Phantoms had none ; their tools and instruments were made of flint and bronze. Yet iron *machetes*, brought by forest Indians, were in use ; the Cacique had even a few guns, obtained in the same way, so that my rifle and revolver were not quite such novelties as I had expected.

The lordly or cacique families were all landed proprietors, and some of them had tenants, but there were no fixed rents ; the tenants, after taking what they

required for their own living, handed over the surplus to the owners of the soil.

Laws, in the common acceptation of the word, did not exist; but there were old customs which answered the same purpose, and to which everybody religiously conformed. Disputes were settled, on the principles of natural justice, by the Cacique, or by the head men of the villages in which they occurred, and their decisions were accepted without demur.

There was a regular system of education. Children were taught to draw and read the common hieroglyphics, and instructed in their religious duties.

The population of the valley, so far as I could gather, was about a hundred thousand; considering how long it had been settled, and its fine climate, a surprisingly small number. The chief cause of this slow rate of increase was undoubtedly the shortness of their lives. The Phantoms were so happy, their lives so peaceful, their cares so few, that their vitality did not receive the stimulus needful for longevity, and they became old at an age when Europeans are in the plenitude of their strength. It is the same with the Pitcairn Islanders, descendants of the mutineers of the *Bounty*, and the Christianised Indians of some of the "missions" organised by the Jesuits in certain districts of South America. These people, like the Phantoms, have no anxieties, live in a fine climate, and enjoy the best of health; yet they begin to age at thirty, and die of natural decay at forty.

The Cacique class, who took part in the work of government, and many of whom were scholars, astronomers, architects, and priests, lived almost twice as long as the common people.

Another cause of the comparative paucity of the population was a peculiar system of infanticide. I noticed that the Phantoms, though short of stature, were almost invariably well made, and sound in wind, limb, and eye-sight. Hunchbacks, club-feet, people blind from their birth, there were none. But knowing, as a medical man, that a certain proportion of children come into the world with congenital malformations and infirmities, and being curious as to what became of them, I one day asked Ixtil for an explanation of the mystery.

"Such children are occasionally born," he said quietly, "but they always die."

"You mean they are put to death."

"They are put asleep and not allowed to waken."

"Oh, but that is horrible—killing poor little children because they happen to be deformed. You are a kind-hearted man, Lord of Light; do you think this is right?"

"Why not? It is better for children born sightless, or otherwise imperfect, to die than to live—better both for themselves and others. They can never be happy; and as they die before the beginning of conscious life death has no terrors for them, and they do not suffer. They sleep on, that is all. No—Ixtil does not think this is wrong; and it is an old custom."

After this nothing more was to be said, for in the Land of Light old customs, though they might conceivably become obsolete, were never discussed; but being curious on the point (for professional reasons), I asked the Cacique how the children doomed to death were sent asleep and prevented from awakening.

"Very easily," was the answer. "A cloth, saturated with *corupa*, is laid on the face, and life ebbs quietly away."

"And the victim does not suffer?"

"Not in the least. If such a cloth happened to fall on your face—by accident or otherwise—while you slept in your hammock, and was not removed within a few minutes, you would sleep on for ever, and never be the wiser."

"A strange way of putting it, Cacique," I answered, rather startled by this suggestion. "I hope no such accident will befall either of us. But what is this *corupa* like? I should like to see it."

"Nothing easier. Ask Melchora. He is learned in drugs as well as in hieroglyphics. He doubtless has some. It is distilled from a rather rare plant, which grows near the foot of the smoking mountain."

I reserve a full account of *corupa* for the scientific work which—as I have already mentioned—I propose shortly to publish; but I may mention here that the drug in question, as I afterwards found, is a subtle and powerful anæsthetic, producing insensibility much more rapidly than either chloroform or sulphuric ether,

and that though long-continued inhalation is fatal, it may be breathed for two or three minutes with impunity, and without causing any other ill-effect than a little nausea and an hour's headache. When diluted with half its bulk of alcohol, the inhalation may be continued eight minutes without danger, and insensibility prolonged at pleasure. But if the cloth be well saturated, and the mouth and nostrils completely covered, a child becomes insensible to pain in thirty seconds, an adult in sixty. The most remarkable property of *corupa*, however, is its power of causing local anæsthesia. This property was quite unknown to the Phantoms, and I accidentally discovered it in a way which I shall presently relate.

But Ixtil was much more given to asking questions than giving answers. The philosophical instruments I had brought with me were a never-failing source of interest to him—above all, the telescope and the little magneto-electric machine. The former was a revelation, the latter a mystery. He insisted on having it pulled to pieces; and after his first alarm—and he was very much alarmed—he was always either taking a shock himself or giving me one.

And then a bright idea struck him, which for neither of us, however, had the happiest of results. There was nobody Ixtil so much detested as Cochitemi, and had the latter been a less important personage he would certainly have felt the weight of the Cacique's displeasure; for the high-priest of the Temple of the

Sun was not only the head of the reactionary party, but proud and conceited to the last degree, haughty in his manner even to Ixtil himself, who thought it would be a fine thing, and a fitting punishment for his insolence, to astonish Cochitemi's weak nerves by sending a smart current of electricity through his fat person.

The Cacique wanted me to perform the operation ; but on the ground that it would not be seemly for a stranger to take so great a liberty with so exalted a personage, I begged leave to be excused.

"Fairhair" (the name given me by the Phantoms) "is quite right," said the Cacique, after a moment's thought. "Everything considered, Ixtil had perhaps better do it himself. The high-priest comes to-morrow with several of his colleagues, an hour before sunrise, to consult with the Lord of Light touching the arrangements now in progress for celebrating the festival of the Sun God. Ixtil would like Fairhair to be here also. Come in good time."

This request was of course equivalent to a command, and even if I had been less curious as to the issue I should have rendered it due obedience.

I appeared in the audience chamber punctually at the time appointed. A few minutes after the magneto-electric machine was placed on the table and I had seen, at the Cacique's request, that everything was in order, the ringing of spear and shield announced that the visitors were without, and the next moment the mat was drawn aside and Cochitemi, followed by his

colleagues, swept into the room. All made the obeisance demanded by etiquette; but the high-priest could not have borne himself more haughtily if he had been the Sun God in person. Me he did not condescend to notice, but I saw him cast more than one curious look at the machine on the table; and the man being as inquisitive as a monkey, I felt sure that he would want to know what the box contained.

And so he did. The palaver over he turned to Ixtil, and with bated breath, but imperious gesture, asked if the Lord of Light would deign to inform him what the queer-looking box with the yellow handles might contain.

"It is a box brought by Fairhair from beyond the mountains. It contains a devil in solution," answered the Cacique, gravely.

Cochitemi laughed scornfully. Being a priest he naturally did not believe in devils.

"You do not believe? Look!" said Ixtil, opening the box.

"Ah, ah! A crooked piece of foreign metal [iron] and wire of gold!" said the priest, laughing again. "Fairhair is a fool and his box a fraud. A devil, indeed; a child's toy rather!"

"You think so! Grasp these handles and you will see! The devil will hold you so fast that you cannot leave go."

"Hold Cochitemi fast! A little box like that!" and he laughed again, louder than before, the other

priests, as in duty bound, following his example. "Fairhair has deceived you, Lord of Light, or, perhaps" (taking the handles and laying them down again), "the devil is asleep."

"Perhaps he is. Ixtil will try to waken him" (putting the machine in action). "Try now."

Cochitemi, still smiling scornfully, again grasped the handles.

The effect was electrical in more senses than one. Never did poor wretch look so scared. The shock frightened him horribly, and his inability to let go the handles made him really believe that he was held in demon clutches. He bellowed like a bull and cursed like a bargee, his face was distorted with rage and pain, and his eyes rolled as if he had been possessed. The Cacique showed no mercy, but went on turning as fast as he could, and if I had not interposed I know not what would have happened.

"Pray stop," I said; "if you continue the man will either go mad or die of terror."

After another turn or two he did so, laughing loudly and vindictively; yet Ixtil was naturally a grave man. I had never seen him laugh before. He evidently enjoyed his triumph over the priest immensely.

"There!" he exclaimed, "Ixtil will put the devil to sleep again. Do you believe in him now, Cochitemi? Why did not you let go?"

"This is Fairhair's work," gasped Cochitemi, looking as if he would like to kill me on the spot. "He is a

wicked wizard, and deserves to die. Take care he does not cast his spells over you, Lord of Light."

With that the high-priest gathered his robes about him, and staggered, rather than walked, out of the room, for the shock had half terrified him to death. The other priests followed him, trembling.

"He has been rightly punished," said Ixtil, after they were gone. "But he lays it all on you, Fairhair, and will do you an ill turn if he can. You will have to be on your guard."

"I am afraid so. But don't you think he is quite as angry with you, Cacique, only he dared not say so openly?"

"Very likely. But he can do Ixtil no harm, and the Lord of Light knows how to protect his friends."

I thanked the Cacique warmly for his kind intentions, yet I should have been quite as well pleased if he had punished Cochitemi in some other way, or, at any rate, punished him without implicating me; for, next to Ixtil, he was the most powerful man in the land, and, unless his looks belied him, as revengeful as he was powerful. Notwithstanding Ixtil's belief that the high-priest could do him no harm, and his confidence that he could protect me, I feared that he would find some means of wreaking his vengeance on both of us. As to the form it might take I had no idea, but I resolved to seize an early opportunity of ascertaining if there was any "old custom" with reference to the treatment of supposed wizards.

CHAPTER XXI.

I PERFORM AN OPERATION, AND BECOME A PHANTOM.

UP to this time my interviews with Ixtil had always taken place in the Hall of Audience, and always in the afterpart of the day, the reason being that his mornings were occupied with affairs of state and the reception of visitors ; for the Lord of Light was as accessible as the president of a democratic republic. The most obscure peasant had no more difficulty in obtaining an audience than the high-priests of the temples of the sun and the moon. Socially, however, Ixtil was hardly less exclusive than a Spanish king or a German princeling. None but members of the lordly families had the right of *entrée* at court, and even among them an invitation to Ixtil's table was considered a great honour. Hence, to invite me would have been a startling innovation, and though Ixtil had, personally, no more respect for court etiquette than for priestly superstition, he was too wise a prince to endanger his popularity by departing from the usage of his ancestors without sufficient cause ; and he knew, what I did not, that his intimacy with me, and my influence with him, were already beginning to excite the jealousy of the Cacique caste.

As I had heard something of this from Melchora it

did not surprise me that my intercourse with Ixtil had so far been purely personal, and limited to the Hall of Audience. I owed my acquaintance with his family to my quality as a healer. One evening, shortly after the electrifying of the high-priest, when I called as usual on the Cacique, I observed that he seemed much concerned. In reply to my inquiry about his health, he said that he was very well, but that the Lady of Light was very ill.

“Yes,” he repeated, after I had expressed my regret, without, however, venturing to ask what was the trouble, “she is very ill, and the court medicine man does not seem able to do her any good. Ixtil would like Fairhair to see her. He is a wise man, and his head is stored with strange learning.” (It was a sign of his favour that Ixtil now nearly always addressed me in the third person.)

There was a risk in complying with this request, for if I undertook the case and failed, like the unfortunate court medicine man, my prestige would be seriously compromised ; and, for anything I knew, the case might be incurable.

“If Fairhair could heal the Lady of Light, Ixtil would be very grateful ; the mother of his children is very dear to him,” said the Cacique, perceiving my hesitation, but not divining its cause.

This appeal it was impossible to resist. Ixtil knew that I had been a medicine man in my own country, and, apart from considerations of humanity, refusal of

his request would have done me more harm in his estimation than failure to heal his wife.

So I said I would do my best; but I assured him that it was quite impossible for me to give an opinion—much less guarantee a cure—until I had seen my patient, and that where so eminent a practitioner as the court medicine man had failed it was not at all probable that I should succeed.

“Fairhair is sure to succeed,” answered Ixtil, seemingly much gratified with my compliance. “The court medicine man is an old woman. Fairhair is learned in many languages. Come! Ixtil will take him.”

“A pleasant prospect,” I thought, as the Cacique led the way from the Hall of Audience. “I have just made an enemy of the high-priest of the Temple of the Sun, and now I am going to make an enemy of the leading physician!”

Preceded by the captain of the guard, and escorted by half-a-dozen of his men, we went to the right wing of the palace (which was large enough to hold a regiment of soldiers), where dwelt the Cacique’s family. It was a part of the interior I had not seen before, and consisted of a suite of stately apartments, connected by corridors with vaulted triangular ceilings. The floors were covered with matting, which deadened sound as effectually as if they had been Turkey carpets, and the walls were either painted or hung with arras.

We found the Lady of Light in a room overlooking the lake. Its furnishing and adornments were

suggestive of refined habits and good taste. According to English ideas, however, there might be too great a profusion of bright colours and gay flowers, and some of the mural painting struck me as being decidedly grotesque. But English ideas do not rule in Phantomland.

My patient was lying on a wicker-couch, surrounded by her women—a fair lady, with a white skin, fine dark eyes, and a sweet expressive face.

I was glad to find that the trouble was not so serious as I had expected. A tumour above the ear, of the sort technically known as a cutaneous cyst, in itself neither painful nor dangerous; yet, as it had grown rapidly, and was involving the neighbouring tissues and nerves, and on the point of ulcerating, it caused considerable local pain and a general disturbance of the system, resulting in great measure from loss of sleep. I fancy, too, the treatment adopted by the court medicine man, instead of affording relief, had served only to aggravate the malady; for, though Phantom practitioners are very fair physicians and acquainted with some potent remedies, they are indifferent surgeons and timid operators.

I saw at once that excision was the only effectual remedy, and so I told the Cacique.

“Will it be painful?” he asked.

I had to answer in the affirmative; but I explained that the operation would be over in a few minutes, and that I could guarantee a speedy and complete cure.

After speaking to his wife, Ixtil asked me to perform the operation at once, and I went for my instruments.

I had already thought of *corupa*, but hesitated to take the responsibility of using it, and I was still turning the matter over in my mind, when it occurred to me to try its effect as a local anæsthetic. I did so in the first instance by applying some of it to my own arm, when I found, to my great satisfaction, that the *corupa* rendered the part so far insensible that I could prick it without feeling any pain whatever.

This was enough. Before commencing the operation I laid on the tumour a compress saturated with *corupa*, and let it remain there ten minutes. Then, with a few rapid strokes of the knife, I excised the tumour before my patient knew that the operation had begun.

Ixtil and his wife were delighted beyond measure, for the tumour, besides causing pain, had threatened to be a great disfigurement; and I was made court medicine man on the spot.

“Fairhair was Ixtil’s friend before,” said the Cacique; “he is now the friend of all his family. If they can do anything to prove their gratitude, Fairhair has only to speak the word.”

“The honour of their friendship is more than a sufficient reward for any service Fairhair has been enabled to render the Lord of Light and his family. But when he thinks of his lost friends his heart is sad.”

“Ixtil has spoken. The order has gone forth; if

these men live they shall be brought hither, and the Lord of Light will answer for their safety."

I bowed my thanks, wondering, not without apprehension, by what mysterious danger they were threatened, and why the Cacique should consider it necessary to answer for their safety any more than for mine. Both his manner and his words confirmed my impression that he knew more than he liked to tell, and I now felt little doubt that, whether for good or for evil, I should see Wildfell and his companions again. Yet why it should be for evil I could not imagine, and I failed to extract any more definite information from Ixtil. He either answered me in riddles, to which I was unable to find a clue, or abruptly closed the conversation by saying that so long as he was my friend I had nothing to fear, and that my healing of his wife had made him more my friend than ever.

It seemed so, for even after my patient became convalescent I was pressed to continue my visits, and if I omitted to call for two or three days running I was sure to be sent for and gently reproached for my neglect. In fact, most of my time was passed in the society of the Cacique and his wife and daughters, for there could be no violation of courtly etiquette in the visits of the family physician; and I enjoyed their company as much as they seemed to enjoy mine.

Ixtil had two sons and two daughters; the former being under charge of a tutor I saw little of them, but the daughters, having finished their education and

reached the age of womanhood, were nearly always with their mother. Zoe, the elder, was sixteen; Suma, the younger, fifteen. In person they did not perhaps conform to English ideas of beauty—the cheek-bones were too high, the jaws too long and prominent, the teeth, though as white as so many pearls, were too large; but girls with peach-like cheeks, fair skins, dark pathetic eyes, long lashes and raven hair, graceful forms and shapely limbs, cannot be deemed plain, much less ugly. For my own part, I must admit that I found them both handsomer and more attractive than the straight-laced and conventional beauties of Europe. Their manner, moreover, was gracious and winning, and they were well instructed in Phantom lore, played to perfection on the *marimba*, and sang in the sweetest of voices the weird and plaintive ballads of their country.

For, though no people could be freer from care or more uniformly cheerful than the Children of Light, there was a marked strain of sadness in their music and poetry. Perhaps it was because their lives were so short and the land in which they dwelt so beautiful.

Ixtil was much attached to his family, and passionately fond of his girls; but Suma, I think, was his favourite. More highly gifted and more thoughtful than Zoe, she took greater interest in her father's scientific pursuits, and he, on his part, found greater pleasure in her company. She was quite an adept in astronomy, and spent many hours with him in the observatory scanning the stars. At his request I gave her lessons in

physiology, natural history, caligraphy, and some other branches of European learning.

All this made life so pleasant, and so fully occupied my time, that the thought of leaving the country grew fainter and fainter, and at last faded almost entirely from my mind. I meant to go away eventually, of course, but the time and manner of my going were relegated to the chapter of accidents and the far future.

The festival of the Sun God was a great time in the Land of Light. A week before the celebration wild Indians began to arrive from every quarter of the compass—yellow and cinnamon coloured men and women, with nothing on worth mentioning, for they were not allowed to bring their weapons to the island. Stolid, heavy, and rather brutal countenances had these prim-ivals; yet they seemed harmless enough, though they bore the character of being both cruel and quarrelsome, and the authorities were probably wise in depriving them of their arms. The purpose of their pilgrimage seemed to be to get drunk and worship in the temples of the sun and moon. The Phantoms were a very sober people—perhaps because they ate so little flesh meat—but they placed at the disposal of their guests an unlimited supply of coarse spirits distilled from maize, and the savages liked it so well that they were tipsy from morning to night, and often from night to morning.

I was surprised at this, and said as much to Ixtil; but he told me it was done to keep their wild friends

quiet (and certainly the more they drank the quieter they became), and confirm them in their allegiance to the Lord of Light; and that, as they never got drunk at any other time (not having the wherewithal), their annual saturnalia could do them no great harm.

The Phantoms themselves were gay in their own fashion, as gay as Neapolitans at Carnival time.

Dancing and marimba-playing went on all night long.

Even the lordly families threw off their reserve, and admitted all and sundry (except the wild men of the woods) to their houses, and feasted all comers.

There were great functions in all the temples, the greatest being celebrated in the Temple of the Sun. The vast building, with its cyclopean columns and vaulted roof, filled with a crowd of forest Indians—sober for the nonce, Phantom maidens all in white and glittering with tinsel, officers of state resplendent in garments of feather-work and helmets of gold and silver, priests in gorgeous robes pacing slowly round the high altar, on which blazed a fire of odoriferous wood, chaunting their weird and mystic hymns—all this made up a scene which, though barbaric, was one of the most striking and picturesque I had ever beheld.

The festival lasted half a moon, and when all was over, and the visitors—who seemed none the worse for their libations—had taken their departure, I asked the Cacique if he had caused inquiry to be made about my missing friends.

“Yes, and Ixtil has information for Fairhair,” referring to a report. “But, first of all, let me ask if one of his friends has the faculty of taking out his eyes and putting them in again?”

“No man can do that, Cacique. Somebody has been speaking to the Lord of Light with a double tongue.”

“Who would dare? According to this report, prepared by the captain of the guard, who would rather die than deceive his master, the Iztaes have four slaves, captured at the ruined city of Atacameno, one cinnamon-coloured, two white, and one swart and hairy. The last is a great magician; he can remove and replace his scalp, and take out and put in his eyes at pleasure.”

“It is they, it is they!” I exclaimed, excitedly; “and the swart man is Ferdinando. He wears a wig and a pot eye, and rumour or misunderstanding has given him two.”

“These men are Fairhair’s friends, then? Ixtil is glad for your sake that they have been saved alive. But what is a wig and what is a pot eye?”

When I had explained, Ixtil seemed much amused.

“You are a wonderful people,” he said. “Why should a blind man want to make believe that he can see, or a bald man that his scalp is clothed with hair? If you could give the legless new limbs, or fill the mouths of the toothless with fresh grinders, that would be a fine thing—something to wonder at and admire.”

“We can. I know people who walk with wooden

feet and whose mouths are filled with grinders that never grew there."

"Fairhair should not talk foolishness to his friend," said the Cacique severely.

I happen to have a false molar, and without answering a word I took it out and held it up. If I had taken off my nose Ixtil could hardly have looked more surprised, and as he returned me the tooth he eyed me closely from head to foot.

"There is nothing else," I said, laughing. "My limbs are all real. This tooth is the only false thing I have about me."

"It is well. Ixtil likes nothing that is not what it seems. Still, he is curious to see this creature with the wig and the pot eye. The Iztaes demand a ransom; shall it be given?"

"Certainly, if the Lord of Light thinks fit and he will do me so great a kindness. What do they ask?"

"Fifty garments of feather-work, and as much fire-water as will keep a hundred braves drunk for half a moon."

This was an unpleasant surprise; feather-work was very valuable, and fifty garments would have represented a heavy sum in the current coin of the realm—if there had been any—and were, in effect, the equivalent of a considerable quantity of cocoa and maize.

"It is not in my power to provide such a ransom," I answered; "but if the Lord of Light will oblige him in this matter, Fairhair will be his debtor for life."

“If Ixtil obliges him will he oblige Ixtil by becoming one of his people and promising to stay in the Land of Light until the Sun God shall call him to the land of everlasting content?”

This request took me so completely by surprise that I hardly knew how to answer. True, I had no desire to leave Phantomland for the present—had ceased thinking about it, in fact; but to pledge myself never to leave it, never to see England again—to become as one dead to Dominick and to all who knew me—to be as completely cut off from the world as if I were a denizen of the moon—that was a very different matter.

“Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.”

But it is a question of restoring to liberty, perhaps saving from death, those whom I have led into the wilderness. Phantomland, if it is not Europe, is much less Cathay, and, promise or no promise, I cannot get away without Ixtil's leave—and Wildfell and Gomez—whether or not—yes, I must. It is shameful to hesitate.

“Fairhair agrees, Cacique. He promises to stay in the Land of Light until its lord bids him go.”

“Its lord will never bid you go, Fairhair,” laying his hand affectionately on my head; “but he waited not for the promise which he was sure would be given. The order has gone forth, and when the next round moon rises above the smoking mountain and beholds her image in the mirrored waters of the lake, Fairhair's friends will be Ixtil's guests.”

CHAPTER XXII.

I AM FOREWARNED, BUT NOT FOREARMED.

“THE smoking mountain seems to be smoking rather harder than usual and—yes—there is a glow about it, as if the hidden fires were burning more fiercely.”

“Fairhair’s eyes are keen, they do not deceive him. The pillar of smoke, generally so light and thin, is waxing bigger and blacker, and—he is right—it is reddened with a tongue of flame; the priests will say that it bodes danger and conveys a warning——”

“A warning of what?”

“That the time of sacrifice approaches, and the fire-demons demand their due,” said Ixtil, lowering his voice.

We were on the roof of the palace, which had been laid out as a garden, and where the Cacique and his family—sometimes sitting under an awning, sometimes strolling about among the plants and flowers—loved to spend the cool of the day; for the air at that height was generally fresh, and the view, which embraced the entire valley of the lake and its setting of forest and mountain, always fair.

The Lady of Light was spinning cotton on a distaff, Zoe making a garment of feather-work, and Suma learning her A B C—comparing the letters I had drawn for

her with those in my Bible—and, as I could see by the movement of her lips, giving each its name. The Bible, I may mention, was one of the three books I had brought with me, the other two being “Shakespeare” and a nautical almanack.

The Cacique and I were smoking long cigars, in shape something like a cheroot, but of the same thickness from end to end, and made from tobacco of a deliciously aromatic flavour, with which for fragrance and delicacy, neither the choicest Havana nor the most costly Turkish could for a moment be compared.

“The time is not far off, then?” I observed, in answer to Ixtil’s last remark.

“Only two moons. The subject is rather a painful one for them,” glancing at the ladies. “There are fewer maidens for selection this year than usual, and they fear the lot may fall on their friend, Lula, daughter of the Lord Xixime, whom you know.”

“Yes, and I have seen Lula—a fine, handsome girl—and is it really possible that she may?——”

“Have to die? More than possible—probable. There are but three to choose from. Ixtil’s heart is heavy, Fairhair. Xixime is one of his dearest friends, and Lula is much beloved by Suma and Zoe.”

“But must it be, Cacique?” I said, deeply pained. “Why not abolish this hideous rite once for all? Why not begin now?”

“Does Fairhair think Ixtil would not if he could?”

Can it afford the Lord of Light any pleasure to sacrifice his friend's daughter and his daughters' friend, and cast her body down yonder smoking abyss? But there is not a Phantom in the valley, not a wild man in the mountains who, as he sees the pillar darkening and the fire glow reddening, does not say to himself or his neighbour that the demons are calling for the tribute; and if the rite were not performed, and, above all, if the mountain should afterwards vomit flame and ashes, Ixtil and all the lordly families would fall victims to the fury of the people and the fanaticism of the priests, the wild men would take possession of the Land of Light, and its glory would be at an end. No, Fairhair, if the lot falls on Lula she must die. But may the Sun God avert the omen."

The Cacique seemed much disturbed; so, by way of changing the subject, I asked if the mountain ever did vomit flame and ashes.

"Only very seldom, and never for very long. But there is a legend—Fairhair may find some mention of it in one of Melchora's old books—there is a legend that many, many ages ago, when the Children of Light had not long been settled in the valley of the lake, the demons waxed terribly wrath, and made the mountain vomit streams of fire and throw out clouds of ashes, which turned day into night, wrought fearful havoc, and destroyed many lives."

"The catastrophe may have suggested the propitiatory rite."

“Fairhair speaks wisely, like a man who observes well and thinks deeply. This is also Ixtil’s opinion; yet, albeit the priests talk much foolishness, and their sayings are not believed by the wise; it must be admitted that since the institution of the rite the pillar of smoke has never been turned into rivers of fire, nor has the sun been darkened at noonday.”

“I don’t think, though, that these are cause and effect. There are volcanoes—smoking mountains—in other parts of the world which, after remaining inactive during untold centuries, pour forth floods of fire and shoot up clouds of ashes, and then again sink into inactivity for long ages.”

“Although no sacrifice is offered?”

“Although no sacrifice is offered.”

“Fairhair, no doubt, speaks the truth; and if it depended on Ixtil’s will the rite should be abolished. But it will never be abolished until there is another vomiting of fire and the people have proof that the rite is an empty superstition. Yet even then the priests would refuse to yield: they would say that the fault was ours, the outburst a sign that the demons demanded still more victims.”

“I have never been up to the crater; I must go one of these days. It would not be a very difficult undertaking, I think.”

“Not at all; there are steps and well-made paths. All the same, Fairhair had better not make the attempt.”

“Why? Is there a law against it—or perhaps you think it would be dangerous just now?”

“Neither law nor danger. But if Fairhair should be seen ascending the smoking mountain the priests would make a great outcry; and, though Ixtil cares little for that, it would be well for Fairhair to wait until the day of the rite, and then he may accompany Ixtil, see the sacrifice, and look into the crater.”

“But why would the priests make an outcry if I went alone?”

“They believe it is an offence against the Sun God; and the Book of Stars says it is of evil omen to go up the smoking mountain at any other time than on the day of sacrifice.”

“The Book of Stars! I never heard——”

“See the horned moon, looking towards the east!” interrupted the Cacique. “In fifteen days your friends will be here. They are already on their way.”

“You have had news of them, then?” I asked in some surprise.

“No. Suma and Ixtil read it last night in the stars.”

“Is Suma as great an adept in star-lore as her father?”

“Not yet; but she is a promising pupil, and, unlike Fairhair, she does not despise the signs in the heavens.”

“Nor shall I despise them, Lord of Light, if they reveal the truth.”

“They do reveal the truth; but it is not always

given to man to read them aright. The stars never lie, though the gazer may err."

"What will be the fate of my friends?"

"It is not quite clear. The stars only yield their secrets to long and patient watching, and I have consulted them but once about these men. All I can with certainty say is that they will arrive safely, yet afterwards be in great peril, from which all, save one, will escape."

"Yes! And who is he?"

"The stars have so far not revealed—perhaps never will reveal."

"What say they about me?"

"They say that Fairhair will be fortunate; that, though he is destined to undergo dangers—as great as any which he has yet encountered—he will surmount them all; and that at some time not very remote—when the earth is in the sign of the cross—he will render a great service to Ixtil's family, either by saving Ixtil's life or the life of one very dear to him."

"That at least I hope will prove true," I returned warmly; "for there is nothing I should so much like as an opportunity of showing that I am not ungrateful for the favours showered on me by the Lord of Light and his family."

"It is good. Ixtil has read Fairhair's heart, and he knows that he speaks with lips of truth."

As the Cacique spoke his wife and daughters rose and pointed towards the west. The sun was bidding

adieu to the valley. All bent low and remained in the same reverential attitude until the great luminary sank out of sight, leaving behind him a trail of glory which, for the few minutes it lasted, illumined sierra and lake with a splendour and beauty that seemed to be rather of heaven than of earth.

In this act of devotion or reverence I unhesitatingly joined, for I saw no wrong in bowing before the most marvellous manifestation of the might and majesty of the creator of the universe.

But Ixtil's predictions, though I listened to them, as I listened to all he said, with respectful attention, appeared to me quite unworthy of his intelligence; and he was aware that I put no faith in astrology, for we had several times discussed the subject, and I had tried to convince him of the impossibility of foretelling the future by reading the stars—or in any other way. At the same time, I could not treat his forecasts with indifference, for I knew they were coloured by his thoughts; and it was quite possible that he had taken this means of putting me on my guard and warning me of dangers which he foresaw, though I did not. He had spoken in a similar strain before, but always in the same oracular vein; and, as he refused to be more explicit, I was in the unpleasant position of being forewarned without the possibility of being forearmed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LOST ARE FOUND.

THE first of Ixtil's predictions—if prediction it could be called—and the one which concerned me the most, came true almost to the letter.

As we were sitting on the roof of the palace, about a fortnight after the conversation described in the last chapter, and within a few hours of the rising of the full moon, Coxoh, the little officer who had escorted me to the palace on my arrival in Phantomland, came up to the Cacique and whispered a word in his ear.

“Now!” exclaimed Ixtil, turning to me with a look of triumph; “will Fairhair believe the stars now? His friends are at the head of the lake, and will be here to-morrow morning an hour after dawn.”

I expressed my thanks to the Lord of Light for having so faithfully kept his word. I did not, however, say much about the stars, for I felt pretty sure that he had taken effectual measures to ensure the fulfilment of his prophecy. But as he seemed quite as pleased as if I had owned myself in the wrong, he probably regarded my silence on the point as a virtual admission of the veracity of the heavenly bodies and the soundness of his forecast.

"The men shall be assigned quarters near you and Melchora," he continued. "Coxoh will meet them at the landing-place and escort them to the palace. Fair-hair would, perhaps, like to accompany him?"

To this query I returned an emphatic affirmative, and a few minutes after sunrise I met the little officer in the eastern colonnade.

In order to give the newcomers a little surprise I arrayed myself for the occasion in the full Phantom costume presented to me by the Cacique the day after I had agreed to become one of his people — a rich feather-work tunic, white kilt, and gold-encrusted helmet. From my waistbelt, composed of alternate plates of gold, silver, and bronze, hung a bronze sword, with a gold hilt, all too small for my un-Phantom-like hand. So far as use was concerned, my old *machete* would have been a good deal more to the purpose.

I did surprise them most effectually, which, seeing how gorgeously I was got up, and that the wanderers had not the least expectation of seeing me, was, perhaps, not to be wondered at. It was a case of surprise on both sides, for they certainly surprised me. I never saw such a set of woe-begone, sun-burnt, mosquito-bitten tatterdemalions in my life. Wildfell had nothing in the world on but a pair of ragged cotton drawers, much too small for him, and an old hat. Gomez the same, barring the drawers, but being a great stickler for propriety, he had made himself an airy garment of *maguey* leaves; his banjo, considerably the worse for wear, was slung

over his shoulder, and the stump of his tooth-brush stuck proudly in the brim of his hat. Ferdinando had rigged himself up in a kilt (borrowed from one of the Phantom boatmen) which looked like a very short petticoat; but his wig was gone, and frequent handling had worn away part of the iris of his pot eye, thereby giving him a peculiar and rather horrible aspect, especially when, as sometimes happened—the sun being very strong—he blinked with the other.

Pedro's costume I am unable to describe for a very excellent reason—he had none.

I saw at once, as the poor fellows stepped out of the boat, that, though struck by the difference between my stature and appearance and that of the other Phantoms, they did not recognise me, and I once thought of keeping them in the dark until we got to the palace. But it would have been too unkind; their worn faces showed how cruelly they must have suffered. They looked distressed and anxious, too, as if apprehensive as to what might befall them.

“Glad to see you, old man!” I exclaimed, clapping Wildfell on the back and taking his hand. “Welcome to Phantomland!”

For a moment he looked positively scared, as if he had seen a spectre; then his face became luminous with delight.

“It is—no, it is not—yes, it is—it must be, by Jupiter, the doctor!” he shouted—in his excitement backing so suddenly as to capsize little Coxoh (who was

close behind him) head over heels into the lake. "Who the——? But," dropping his voice, "is it real, or are you only a phantom?"

"A Phantom I am, but real for all that, and heartily glad to see you, dear friend," clapping him on the back and taking his hand again.

"Well, it is no ghostly grip you give, anyhow."

"*Por dios, el Señor Doctor!*" broke in Gomez, putting his arms round my neck and fairly hugging me. "I knew it; I knew it. I knew he would turn up again. I felt sure he had escaped those infamous Indians, and would find a means of rescuing us."

As I shook hands with Ferdinando and Pedro, Coxoh came spluttering out of the water, looking, as Wildfell observed, "damped indignant."

"Just apologise to the little chap, will you?" he said; "and say how sorry I am for tumbling him over so unceremoniously. I fear I have spoiled his fine feathers, though."

Coxoh took the apology in good part, and we started on our journey up the hill.

"I say, you seem to have been having a good time," observed the American, viewing me all over. "Do you know what I took you for?"

"What?"

"The President of the Phantom republic; or, may be, you've married the Cacique's daughter, or whatever the head boss of the country calls himself, and been adopted as heir-apparent."

“Not quite that,” I answered, laughing. “I am the court physician, that is all.”

“That’s all! A doctor is like a gamecock, he always lights on his feet. If ever I get back to New Haven, Connecticut, I’ll buy myself a diploma and learn to make pills. But, I say, how the mischief did you get here?”

“That’s a long story. I’ll tell you when we get to the palace.”

“You live in a palace, then! I say, Ferdinando, he lives in a palace.”

“Naturally, being court physician; and you are going to live in a palace, too.”

“The deuce we are! That will be a rise in life and no mistake. Why, we have been living in dog-kennels.”

“You have had a bad time, then?”

“A bad time? Rather! Don’t we look it?”

There was no mistake about that—they did look it.

“An awfully bad time,” continued Wildfell dolefully; “worse for me than any of the others. Ferdinando had his pot eye and his wig, Gomez his banjo and his tooth-brush—Pedro could make himself useful in all sorts of ways—but my knowledge of the timber trade, and dye-woods, and book-keeping by double entry, together with a considerable facility of expression in my native tongue, did not serve me in the least—were quite thrown away, in fact—and if I had not remembered that I once learned to dance, and been able to recall a few hymns learnt at the Sunday-school

in my infancy, I do believe the beggars would have made a target of me."

"You acted as singing and dancing-master, then?"

"Not much of a master, you bet! Say slave, and you will be nearer the mark. Yes, I had to sing and dance every night—sometimes all night long—while Gomez strummed on his banjo. Fancy a free-born American citizen dancing stark naked before a lot of cinnamon-coloured savages! However, I invented a lot of new steps, which I mean to patent when I get back to the States."

"I felt sure they had taken you prisoners; my fear was you would be horribly ill-used, perhaps tortured to death."

"Well, we have been horribly ill-used, and only escaped death by accident. It was Ferdinando who saved us—or rather his wig."

"I shall never see that wig again," sighed Ferdinando, pointing to his bald pate. "Think what a sight I am! How can I appear at court without hair on my head?"

"Never mind that. Better be without hair than without head."

"But how on earth could his wig save you?" I asked. "You are surely joking!"

"Joking! Deuce a bit. It's only too serious; isn't it, Ferdinando? I'll tell you all about it. Where you were that morning I have no idea. Good for you that you had made yourself scarce. As for us, we were

wakened by a terrific war-whoop, and on opening our eyes found ourselves surrounded by a hundred hideous-looking Indians, all in their war-paint, and pointing at us with their spears. Resistance would have been useless. We might as well have tried to resist an avalanche; and I was preparing for my latter end when Ferdinando, jerking his head suddenly on one side—for the spears were getting uncomfortably near—his wig tumbled off.

“The savages fell back with a howl of dismay—they had never seen a scalp come off without being touched before—and when Ferdinando clapped the wig on again they were more astonished than ever, and seemed half-scared out of their wits.

“Then I had a happy thought. ‘They think you are a wizard, Ferdinando,’ I called out; ‘pull out your pot eye.’

“Which Ferdinando did, put it back again, and winked at them with the other. He was quite equal to the occasion, I assure you, and showed more resource than I gave him credit for.

“‘If you understand their lingo, Pedro,’ I said, ‘tell ’em we possess supernatural powers, and that if they don’t let us alone and take themselves off, we will—something bad will happen to ’em—anything you like, only frighten ’em.’

“As luck would have it, Pedro did understand their lingo, and he told them what I said. I am afraid, though, he was too much scared to give it proper effect.

Anyhow they were not to be gammoned. They did not hack us to pieces, as they thought of doing; but they ordered us to get up, tied our hands behind our backs, and, after making prize of our goods and chattels, gave the word to march.

"As Pedro heard afterwards, my threat did not frighten them a bit, and they soon got over their first scare; but these Indians have great faith in dreams, and, as it happened, their chief, Teakualitzigiti by name—spell it, if you can—had dreamt, a few nights before, that he was attacked by fifteen tigers, all at once, and was getting very much the worst of it, when a man without a scalp dropped down from the sky and drove them away. So when Ferdinando's wig fell off he thought he was the man. That saved our lives; and Pedro felt sure they would not hurt Ferdinando, however they might treat the rest of us.

"Well, after a three days' tramp through the forest we reached our captors' village. I never suffered so much in my life as during those three days, Carlyon. The mosquitoes bit like the very devil, and, our hands being tied, we could do nothing to defend ourselves. But—what was a thousand times worse—we were unable to scratch. It was maddening; and if it had lasted much longer I do believe I should have gone off my head.

"When we got to the village we were untied and thrust into a filthy hut about the size of a big dog-kennel, and containing, on a moderate computation,

about ten million fleas ; but, being at liberty to scratch, we contrived to exist.

“ A few days later a great palaver was held to deliberate on our fate. Opinions were divided between flaying us alive and making targets of us, but in the end it was decided, by the casting vote of Teakualitzigiti, that we should be allowed to live on condition of amusing them and making ourselves generally useful.

“ When I say ‘ we,’ I mean Gomez, Pedro, and myself. There had never been a question of killing Ferdinando, but they made his life miserable by continual examination of his wig and pot eye, which they never tired of making him put on and off and in and out. At last, Teakualitzigiti boned the wig altogether, had his hair cut short, and stuck it on his own cranium—and nice he looked, the hideous rascal.

“ Pedro fetched and carried, and acted as a beast of burden ; Gomez strummed on his banjo ; and, as I told you just now, I hit on the idea of singing hymns and doing the light fantastic. It was not what you would call an ideal existence, though ; and between being eaten by fleas and mosquitoes, and not having enough to eat ourselves, you may be sure we did not wax fat. But we had just to submit. Escape was out of the question ; we were watched day and night ; and even if we had bolted and got a day’s start, the wretches could have tracked and overtaken us. I might have bettered my lot considerably by accepting Teakualitzigiti’s proposal to marry his sister. But I positively refused. I would

rather have been flayed alive. Muatzicatanineliveso (the young lady in question) would have carried off the prize for ugliness in a show of ring-tailed monkeys, and she seemed to think washing a sin, and wore no clothes worth mentioning—you may imagine the rest.

“How long we led this life I have no idea. We lost all count of time; and I began to think we should end by becoming as brutalised as the noble savages whose slaves we were. You can imagine—no, you cannot—how delighted we were when Teakualitzigiti told us he wanted no more of us—that we were to go. Where, we did not know, nor much care. Our lives were so hard and monotonous that any change would be a relief, and almost certainly an improvement. We have had a long tramp, though, and must have covered a pretty considerable number of miles. Our escort could not have been in a bigger hurry if they had engaged to deliver us on a certain day, under a penalty for non-fulfilment of contract.”

“They had.”

“How? Come, don’t be mysterious, there’s a good fellow. I hate mysteries. Tell us all about it.”

“Presently. Here we are at the palace. Let me show you to your quarters.”

The room to which I took them was lofty and spacious, furnished in the best Phantom style—tables, wicker chairs, mats, and four beautiful hammocks slung all in a row.

“Magnificent!” exclaimed Wildfell, “we are in

clover here and no mistake. A slight improvement on dog-kennels this. Do you know I really feel as if I could sing out of pure gladness and gratitude."

"Do," I said, never thinking he would. "Let me hear one of your hymns."

On this he stood up, and, much to my surprise, rolled out in a fine bass voice "The Old Hundredth."

When he had finished my eyes were filled with tears.

"It makes me think of the old home," I said, rather sadly. "I shall never see it again."

"Of course you will. There need be no difficulty in getting away from here. We cannot be far from the settled part of Guatemala—Quesaltenango, don't you call it? But let us have your story; we can talk about that afterwards."

"I guessed it was to you we owed our rescue from the wild Indians," said Wildfell, when I had concluded my narrative, "but I little thought that to save us you had sacrificed yourself."

"You put the case rather too strongly, my friend. Besides, as I got you into the difficulty, it was surely my duty to get you out of it."

"Well, I am not quite so sure about that. I guess we got ourselves into the difficulty by hunting after that accursed gold. If we had gone ahead as you wanted us, it would have been all right."

"And I am not so sure about that. If we had gone on we should have been sure to fall into the hands

of the wild Indians sooner or later, and in that case, whatever else had become of us, we should not have reached the Phantom City. I am very much disposed to think, too, that if I had come here in any other way—as a ragged wanderer on foot, for instance—I should not have lived to tell the tale. I question even if I should have been allowed to see the Cacique.”

“How so? They seem a very kindly people these Phantoms.”

“So they are. But they have their own ideas about strangers. And I had a hint the other day—. However, there is no use troubling about that at present, and I may be mistaken.”

“But you are quite safe now?”

“Quite. For I not only enjoy the friendship and protection of the Cacique—in which, I may mention, you are included—but my cure of the Lady of Light has brought me several distinguished patients; and I don’t think they would like to lose me. One way and another I am in high favour.”

“Which is another way of saying you are a highly favoured mortal. Anyhow, you might be a good deal worse off—as a slave among the wild Indians, for example. If I had not a mother and a sweetheart in New Haven, Connecticut—who must be thinking I am a pretty long time about buying my logwood—and I should be throwing away my chance of being elected President, I wouldn’t mind pitching my tent here for life and keeping you company. I guess I could put

these Phantoms up to a thing or two in dye-woods and timber, and turn an honest penny for myself at the same time. Seriously, though, I am anxious, both for family and business reasons, to get home as soon as may be, and if you can help me in this, you will do me a great favour."

"I will do my best, you may be sure; though I shall be very sorry to lose you, Wildfell. But I must tell you frankly, that I don't think it will be easily managed—not at all without the consent and co-operation of the Cacique; and you must possess your souls in patience for a few days, until I find an opportunity of approaching him on the subject."

"All right, I leave it to you; only as soon as you can, please. Shall we have an opportunity of thanking the President—the Cacique I mean—for his hospitality?"

"Certainly. The Lord of Light will receive you in the Hall of Audience an hour before sunset."

"With all my heart. I shall be delighted to make his lordship's acquaintance. But, I say," glancing at his ragged drawers, "this is not exactly a court dress. Could you lend a fellow a suit of clothes?"

"Here are some Phantom costumes very much at your disposal. I have nothing else."

"I don't want anything else. What would be the good of pants and a tail coat in a country like this? And I should like to see myself in a petticoat and feathers for once in a way. Just show me the knack of putting them on, will you?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SACRIFICE.

IXTIL, as I knew he would, gave us a gracious reception, for the Lord of Light was as courteous as a Spanish grandee, and, as Wildfell put it, "affable at that." Yet, beyond the exchange of a few compliments, and an examination of Ferdinando's pot eye, and an explanation about the wig, very little passed. Notwithstanding the geniality and cheerfulness of his manner, I could see that Ixtil was anxious and pre-occupied, and as soon as I conveniently could I brought the conversation to a close.

"Whatever Blueeyes, Blackbeard, and Baldhead want, let them have," he said, "they are Ixtil's guests. And one of these evenings, when there is light of moon, you must bring them on the roof. The Lady of Light and her daughters would like to make their acquaintance."

Of Pedro he took no notice whatever, for the poor fellow was a tame Indian, and the Cacique regarded with supremest contempt all his countrymen who had accepted Christianity and bowed to the Spanish yoke.

I had no difficulty in divining the cause of Ixtil's anxiety. The smoking mountain looked ugly; the

time of the propitiatory rite was at hand, and in a very few days the victim would have to be chosen.

As for the volcano, we were almost in instant expectation of a violent outburst. After nightfall we could see the molten lava rise nearly to the lip of the crater; and a day or two previously, when, at the Cacique's request, I made a visit to the foot of the mountain, and put my ear to the ground, I could distinguish, as it were, the dull reverberations of underground thunder; the trees, moreover, were covered with white ashes, the earth trembled, and everything portended an approaching catastrophe.

These ominous signs, the like of which had not been seen for ages, caused great excitement among the Phantoms; and I was not surprised to hear, shortly after Wildfell's arrival, that the priests of the four temples, headed by Cochitemi, had waited on the Cacique and demanded that the victim should be chosen quickly, and the sacrifice consummated forthwith. It was evident, they said, that the fire-demons were very angry, and, unless they were immediately propitiated, they, the priests, could not answer for the consequences. A disaster such as that which took place many ages ago, in the time of the Lord of Light, Latacungas, might come to pass at any moment.

"Why should the fire-demons be angry?" asked Ixtil, sarcastically. "They are surely very unreasonable; they have had their due: the maiden tribute has always been paid. Can you priests, who know every-

thing in heaven and earth—the thoughts of men and the mind of the Sun God—can you, who pretend to be his servants, explain this mystery?”

“It is true that the maiden tribute has been paid, but the fashion of it has been changed,” answered Cochitemi; “the victim is no longer thrown to the demons alive. Perhaps that is the reason of their anger.”

“The high-priest’s words are as wind. Had the change vexed the demons they would have shown their anger at once. For nearly a man’s lifetime have they been content with a dead body, why should they now want a living maiden?”

“The Lord of Light is the wisest of men,” returned Cochitemi, with mock humility and a profound obeisance. “It is he, not the priests of the four temples, who knows the thoughts of gods and devils, and can read the language of the stars. But the fire-demons are never angry without a cause, and if the present cause be not that which Cochitemi, in his ignorance, has suggested, it can only be the presence of these strangers.”

“Wrong again. These strangers have only just arrived, and the smoking mountain has shown signs of anger for three moons.”

“The Lord of Light forgets that before Fairhair came it showed none whatever, and that since the coming of his four friends it has vomited ashes, and the smoke has become blood-red. And Ixtil will remember that when Fairhair first came Cochitemi warned him that if the

stranger were let live the Lord of Light would risk the forfeiture of the Sun God's favour. Is it not written in the Book of Stars? If these other men——”

“Nonsense!” interrupted Ixtil, angrily. “If Fairhair had not found favour in the Sun God's sight, he would not have protected Fairhair during his voyage through the air, and allowed him to reach the Land of Light in safety. And Blueeyes, Blackbeard, and Bald-head, they also enjoy the favour of the Sun God. The time of sacrifice shall be hastened as you desire. Let it take place seven days hence, and then perchance the fire-demons will cease from troubling and the smoking mountain be at peace.”

I learnt this from Melchora, who, in his capacity as priest and scribe, was present at the interview. From the first Melchora had been friendly, and quite ready to tell me all he knew of the ancient history of the country, hieroglyphics, and the rest; but about the existing state of things, the relations of Ixtil with the priesthood and the lordly families, and what may be called the inner politics of the day, he had shown great reserve; and, thinking that in this regard he was merely conforming to superior orders, I did not like to press him with questions which, as likely as not, might be reported to the Cacique, who, though he often consulted me, had never, as I now saw, given me his entire confidence.

Latterly, however, Melchora had grown more communicative—acting perhaps on a hint from Ixtil—and, without any solicitation on my part, he told me all that

passed at the interview which I have described. It gave me an unpleasant surprise; for, though I had already gathered that old-fashioned Phantoms, especially among the priests, objected to my presence in the country, I never thought that an attempt would be made to render us responsible for a possible eruption of the volcano. True, the Cacique was our friend, and he had stood up for us nobly, like the fine fellow he was. But would he be able to withstand a movement in which nearly the whole of the priesthood and many of the lordly families were taking part, since the opposition included, not only the fanatics of both orders, but all whom my rapid rise in Ixtil's favour had rendered envious, or who thought my influence was making him more than ever a despiser of old customs?

Certainly, a powerful combination, and if the Cacique could not withstand it, what then?

I put the question plainly to Melchora.

"Much would depend on the behaviour of the smoking mountain," he said; "for, though the country people took little interest in public affairs, they were deeply religious, and stood so much in awe of the fire-demons, that they would back up the priests in any measures they might deem necessary to propitiate the demons and prevent a catastrophe."

"Which means, in effect, any measures Cochitemi may deem necessary?"

"Cochitemi is the high-priest of the Temple of the Sun, and his words have great weight."

“And in that case you think the Lord of Light would be forced to yield?”

“Fairhair is a man of understanding; he must draw his own conclusions.”

This meant that Melchora did think so.

“If the Lord of Light were forced to give way, what thinks Melchora would be our fate?”

“Cochitemi is deep and wily, who can fathom his thoughts?” answered the scribe with a smile. “But Fairhair is a great physician; he came down from the sky; no harm is likely to befall *him*.”

“But my friends?”

Melchora did not answer.

“What is the Book of Stars?” I asked. “I have heard it mentioned before. Why did Cochitemi refer to it?”

“The Book of Stars is one of the oldest codices we possess, and written in pictures which few can understand. The writer was Mediotaque Cuixlahuaecan, a renowned seer and priest, whose sayings are held in high honour, and many of whose predictions have been fulfilled. The highly orthodox, and all the priests, hold that the Sun God spoke through his mouth, and that if his warnings are neglected evil will befall. It is in the Book of Stars that are found the words inscribed in the Temple of the Cross and the other temples:—

‘When Light the tribute fails to give
The sun-born race will cease to live.’

“He has also said: ‘If ye would live, the stranger

that comes amongst you shall surely die,' and this was doubtless the passage to which Cochitemi referred."

"But I thought there never had been any strangers—that I was the first."

"So you are."

"How then——"

"Is Fairhair alive? Well, if he had not come in an air ship and excited the curiosity and won the friendship of the Lord of Light, Melchora thinks it very likely that he would not have been alive. Cochitemi wanted him to be put to death at once, quoting, in support of his demand, the sayings of Mediotauquel Cuixlahuaecan; whereupon Ixtil, who has a subtle wit and not much reverence either for the seer or his book, answered and said that the stranger should surely die."

"The Lord of Light is a great and good prince," said the high-priest. "How and when shall this long-legged interloper die?"

"Of old age; and so shall the saying of Mediotauquel, the seer, be fulfilled."

"And then was Cochitemi very wroth, and went away cursing."

Now I understood why Ixtil had deprecated the coming of my friends, and I began to fear that I had got them out of the frying-pan into the fire. His reason for acceding to my request was probably quite as much a desire to strike a blow at the influence of the priests as to oblige me; and if no harm came of our presence in the country the chances were greatly in his

favour, for the Cacique was both strong and resolute. But in the event of the fire-demons taking sides with Cochitemi and his abettors the victory might be with the latter, and that, I could not disguise from myself, meant ruin for us all, Melchora's assurance to the contrary notwithstanding. I was the very last person the high-priest was likely to spare.

"Is there anything in the Book of Stars about wizards?" I asked the scribe, after a moment's reflection.

"Wizards? Would Fairhair like to know? Here is the codex," reaching a roll of manuscript, "let us see. This is Ixtil's copy. There are only two other copies in existence—one belonging to the Temple of the Sun, the other to the Temple of the Stars. Wizards, wizards!" turning over the leaves. "Yes, behold!"

"What does the passage say?"

The pictures were so different from the modern characters that I could make nothing of them.

"The passage runs thus: 'If the man who is a wizard and has dealings with goblins and gnomes be not cast alive to the fire-demons, the smoking mountain shall vomit red water and send up clouds of white ashes, and the Land of Light will be covered with thick darkness at noonday.'"

I said no more, but I had my thoughts. This passage was doubtless in Cochitemi's mind when he stigmatised me as a wizard, and if he got his way I should have to take an involuntary header into the crater of

the volcano. Not a very agreeable outlook. But I hoped the fire-demons would have a lucid interval, and so give Wildfell and the others a chance of getting away. Once they were gone I should not have much to fear. Ixtil would find it easier to protect one than five, and my professional successes were making me many friends.

For the present, however, I decided to keep my own counsel. It could answer no useful purpose to alarm Wildfell prematurely, and as the priests were too much taken up with preparations for the sacrificial rite to have time for anything else, there was no immediate danger.

Two days later the victim was chosen, and, to the great grief of Ixtil and his family, the lot fell upon Lula. The Cacique felt the blow keenly, for, though in a measure foreseen, he had hoped even against hope that his friend's child might, after all, be spared.

"If that cursed mountain would only be quiet," he said fiercely, "Ixtil would risk everything, and set Cochitemi and his infernal crew at defiance; they are the true fire-demons."

But the mountain would not be quiet. Every day there rose up from the crater a pillar of black smoke, which, reflecting the seething lava below, was turned at night into a pillar of lurid fire, and the top of the volcano was white with ashes.

Wildfell was very tender-hearted, especially where women were concerned, and when I told him what was

going to happen he got quite excited and proposed a rescue.

“Poor girl, poor girl! Why these Phantoms are worse than the wild Indians! Let us carry her off and get out of the country. We can do it—I am sure we can.”

Nothing would have pleased me better if it could have been done. But rescue, as I succeeded in convincing him, was quite out of the question. The mere attempt would have insured our immediate destruction and profited poor Lula nothing at all; and, acting on a hint from Ixtil, I advised Wildfell and the others to show themselves as little as possible pending the celebration of the rite. In the excited state of the volcano and of public opinion, and with so many forest Indians flocking into the city, the least indiscretion might lead to unpleasant consequences, the more especially as the occasion, being not one of rejoicing, the visitors were not allowed (until after the ceremony) their wonted solace of fire-water.

The sacrifice was to take place after dark, and Ixtil, as he had promised, allowed me to witness the celebration in the Temple of the Cross and accompany the funeral procession to the crater of the volcano. The only condition he made was that I should put on a red mantle and keep myself rather in the background until we reached the foot of the smoking mountain, where I might be as near him as I liked.

Slipping in with the crowd, I found a place where

I could see without being seen—in the shadow of one of the cyclopean columns of rough-hewn stones that supported the roof of the temple.

Anything more gloomily impressive than the scene around me it would be difficult to imagine. Except the half-naked Indians, whose faces were hideous with paint, the worshippers wore scarlet mantles, and every head was uncovered. The temple was lighted with torches, held by the men of the Cacique's guard, who were ranged in the form of a cross. A raised platform, stretching from side to side of the vast building, supported the altar—a square stone slab—on each corner of which a flaming torch was planted. In front of the altar stood a couch, in shape like a bier, and covered with a fair white shroud.

For a few minutes intense silence prevailed, all heads being bowed, as if everyone was offering up an inward prayer. Then were heard the strains of a solemn dirge, sung as it would seem by an invisible choir, and a procession of priests, emerging from the shadows, marched solemnly across the platform, and ranged themselves on each side of the altar. Their scarlet robes were wrought with grotesque devices in black; round their necks were twisted the skins of green tree snakes, so well preserved that they seemed alive; their feet and heads were bare—faces white with powdered ashes, and each man carried a torch, which burnt with a blue light.

Again the dirge, and from the other side of the platform came Ixtil, also robed in scarlet and uncovered, followed by Lula, dressed in white, and crowned with

flowers. The poor girl, who was supported by her father and brother, walked erect and bore herself bravely, but her lips twitched convulsively, and her face was as pale as death.

They led her to the couch, into which she sank, and as, with a wild convulsive movement, the victim covered her face with her hands, Ixtil dropped the fatal cloth over her head. The dirge, which for an instant had subsided, rose once more; yet higher still rose a long, sobbing wail, heart-breaking in the intensity of its sadness in which the worshippers gave vent to the feelings they were no longer able to contain.

After another spell of silence, broken only by the half-suppressed sobs of the women, the Cacique gently raised the cloth and handed it to the high-priest.

All was over. The *carupa* had done its work.

Then Ixtil, whose face was hardly less pallid than that of the dead girl, drew the shroud over the body, and four priests, coming before the altar, raised the couch on their shoulders, the guard formed in two lines, and the bearers, preceded by the Cacique, and followed by the entire body of priests, holding aloft their blue torches, and singing a wild requiem, walked slowly down the middle of the temple, escorted by the guard.

In this order—the blue and red torches still burning—the priests still singing, the procession moved towards the lake. When it reached the shore the body was placed in a large boat, where, by Ixtil's favour, room was found for me. Most of the priests, the guard, a

number of high personages, and officials came after in other boats. All sounds, save the dip of the paddles and oars in the water, were now hushed, and we glided swiftly through the brooding night towards the smoking mountain, over which the pillar of fiery smoke threw a lurid and fitful glare.

At the foot of the volcano all disembarked. The four priests again raised the victim's body on their shoulders, and the procession formed in the same order as before.

We mounted slowly, keeping time with the melancholy chant intoned by the priests. But the road being wide and well graded the ascent was easy. An hour's walking brought us nearly to the top; but the higher we rose the fouler became the air, and, in order to avoid being stifled with sulphurous fumes and carbonic acid gas, we had to work round to windward.

At last we reach the upper side of the crater, and can see the molten lava, in a state of violent agitation, rising and falling not more than twenty feet below us. A little higher and it would be over the lower edge. Had the wind not been pretty strong, and so kept the smoke well away from us, we should have been unable to get near enough to complete the rite.

The four priests bring the bier to the brink. The other priests and the guard stand behind them holding their torches aloft. Ixtil, his livid face damp with sweat, takes the body in his arms. It is almost too much for him, for, though a strong man, he is overcome with excitement and emotion. I offer to help him.

“Back, Fairhair!” he exclaims, with a bitter laugh. “Know you not that if the Lord of Light does not this with his own hands the demons will refuse the sacrifice?”

Then, by a great effort, poising the body on his uplifted hands, he throws it headlong into the crater. But in doing this he overbalances himself, and had I not caught his kilt as he fell the Cacique would assuredly have followed Lula to her fiery grave.

“Thanks, Fairhair!” he says, grasping my hand. “You have saved Ixtil’s life! The stars spoke truly. The sacrifice is consummated. Let us be gone!”

And then we hurry down the smoking mountain—the torches are quenched, and in darkness and silence we row swiftly away as from a place accursed.

CHAPTER XXV.

WILDFELL WANTS TO GO.

"WE are saved!" I exclaimed, as Wildfell and I stood on the great colonnade watching the splendid display of light and colour which always accompany sunrise in the tropics. "We are saved! At any rate, for the present."

"Saved! What are you rambling about, Carlyon?"

"Don't you see that the volcano has almost stopped smoking?"

"I do, and I am rather sorry for it. I should like to see a good rattling eruption for once in a while—streams of molten lava hissing into the lake, clouds of cinders darkening the air—a regular flare-up, you know. But what has this to do with our being saved? You are a good deal deeper read in theology than I am if you can see any connection between a volcano and salvation—rather the other way, I should think."

"I did not mean saved in that sense, as you well know," I answered a little tartly. "But just let me tell you this, Wildfell: if the volcano had gone on smoking, and spouting cinders, we should have stood a pretty good chance of being chucked into the crater."

"Come now, no mysteries! I don't like 'em, as I

think I told you. They make my hair stand on end and harrow my soul; that's why I never read tales of mystery and murder. I prefer imagination and humour. Tell us what you mean, like a man, there's a good fellow."

I told him.

"Well! may I—— And do you really think that if the volcano had gone on fumigating, that hobgoblin of a high-priest—Catchimatit, don't you call him?—that the old villain would have had us cooked in the crater?"

"He would have tried, undoubtedly; and I very much fear he would have succeeded."

"And if the volcano should flare up again—and it may do any moment, you know—would he still try it on, do you think?"

"I have no doubt he would."

"Well, then, the word is, 'Quick march, boys.' Interview your friend Ixtil right off, please, and get us leave of absence. I have a decided objection to being roasted in red-hot lava. And if you are wise you will go with us, Carlyon."

"I cannot. I have given my word to stay. As for you and Ferdinando—I don't think Gomez and Pedro much want to go—I shall speak to the Cacique in the course of a day or two. Leave it to me. I will lose no time. For though the volcano is at rest now, there is no telling how long it may remain so, and I should be sorry for you not to get safely away."

“So should I—very. You will bring the matter before the Lord of Light as soon as possible, then?”

“Certainly.”

And a few days later I did.

But to my surprise and annoyance I could not persuade Ixtil to accede to my request. Though for his position and opportunities wonderfully enlightened, he was not quite as free from superstition as he sometimes fancied and pretended, and it was evident that the stoppage of the eruption so soon after the sacrifice had made a deep impression on his mind. He could not help believing that the one event had some connection with the other, and he thought the volcano would remain quiet for at least a twelvemonth, probably for years.

He did not, however, attempt to deny that if the eruption had continued the priestly party might have got the upper hand, in which event my friends would have been in danger.

“But that is all past,” he said. “They are now quite safe. Ixtil can guarantee their safety.”

“All the same,” I urged, “the priests—and everybody else, probably, but you and me—must be confirmed in the idea that the fire-demons can be propitiated, and the peril of an eruption averted, by sacrifice; and should there be another outbreak, they may demand another sacrifice.”

“Fairhair speaks truly; but there will not be another outbreak. Besides, how can these men go? The wild people would destroy them.”

"Not if the Lord of Light would deign to give my friends an escort and a safe conduct."

"That cannot be, Fairhair. There are other reasons. It is impossible, impossible."

"Must they then remain here all their lives? Blue-eyes has a mother, and if she thinks him dead, her grey hairs will be brought with sorrow to the grave."

"Is that indeed so? Ixtil will reflect. But no, it is impossible—for the present. Let Blueeyes have patience."

When Wildfell heard this he was very much cut up. He had counted on getting away at once.

"Poor mother!" he exclaimed sadly; "and Grace—they will think I am lost, and mourn me as dead. I'll tell you what it is, Carlyon. I mean to go soon—whatever this Lord of Light says—even if I have to go alone."

"I would not advise you, Wildfell. You might as well jump into the crater at once. It is hard, I know, but your best course is to wait quietly here. Ixtil never acts without good reasons, though he does not always disclose them; and I feel sure that in the end he will not only let you go, but help you in going. And your mother and Miss Grace will surely not despair. You have not been away a year yet—and that is no long time for exploring a country."

"Well, I will try to be resigned. And I did tell them, when I wrote last from Campeachy, that they must not be surprised if they did not hear from me for

a pretty long time. But what can I do in this very beautiful, but dead-alive country? There does not seem to be much opening for trade, or demand for notions."

"Learn Phantom and fish."

"Well, I guess I will. Got any hooks?"

"You can have any quantity. Phantoms are expert fishers."

"Good for the Phantoms. But a fellow cannot always be fishing. Got any books?"

"Yes, the Bible and Shakespeare, which I shall be glad to lend you."

"Thank you. They happen to be just the two books I know by heart. But all the same it will be pleasant and profitable to look at them occasionally—by way of refreshing my memory, you know."

Gomez passed his time strumming on his banjo and picking up Phantom, in which he soon became tolerably proficient, and, being a lively fellow, made himself many friends. Ferdinando, however, would do nothing but loaf about and drink, and he ended by getting himself into serious trouble—went into the Temple of the Sun smoking, spat on the floor, and insulted a priest. He was arrested at once and taken before Ixtil, who was naturally very angry, and sent for me.

"Tell Blackbeard," said the Cacique, "that in spitting on the floor of the temple he has committed a crime which the priests, if they had their way, would punish with death. But in consideration of his igno-

rance he is pardoned. Let him, however, beware. The priests never forgive; and if he commits another such offence Ixtil will leave the fool to his fate."

Three days later Gomez came to me with a white face.

"Ferdinando was in a fit," he said. "He had left him sleeping in his hammock, where he sometimes lay all day long, and when he returned found him, as he thought, sleeping still. But do as he would he could not rouse the man, and feared greatly that something was the matter."

"Yes," I said, when I saw Ferdinando's face and touched his hand; "something is the matter. He is dead!"

"Dead! Impossible. He was quite well this morning."

"That may be. How long was he alone?"

"Several hours. Ever since this morning."

After examining the body carefully, I came to the conclusion that the man had not died a natural death. I felt almost certain, indeed, that he had been killed by *carupa*, administered while he slept.

I reported the case forthwith to the Cacique.

"Ixtil is not much surprised," he observed gravely. "Said he not that the priests never forgive? And spitting in a temple they regard as a deadly insult to the Sun God and themselves."

"You think Cochitemi has done this, then?"

"Fairhair need not ask. He knows the high-priest. But as for this Blackbeard, there is nothing to regret. He was a drunkard and a fool, and deserved not to live."

"Well," said Wildfell, when I repeated the remark to him, "Ferdinando was a scallawag, I admit. All the same it is rather hard law to kill a fellow for expectorating in the wrong place, and I am sorry he has gone. I was the means of bringing him here, and he might have helped me to get away. The man had his good points, too, and he was company. Yes, doctor, I am sorry these wretches have done for Ferdinando."

"So am I. Especially as they may be doing for some other body in the same way."

"That old hobgoblin again, eh! You think we had better keep our weather eyes open?"

"I do indeed. There are no doors, only mats; and nothing is easier than for anybody—say an emissary of Cochitemi—to slip in after nightfall, when we are all asleep, and drop a cloth, saturated with *carupa*, over a fellow's head."

"And then?"

"He would have slept his last sleep."

"Die without knowing it, as poor Ferdinando did. Yes, it behoves us to be on our guard. What do you propose?"

"I will shift my hammock here, and we will watch through the night, turn and turn about."

"Agreed. And I promise you that if I catch one of those priestly hobgoblins prowling round he'll have waked his last wake."

But, as often happens in life, the danger we feared did not come in the shape we expected.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SUMA'S DANGER AND IXTIL'S OATH.

A FEW weeks afterwards typhoid fever broke out, and wrought great havoc among the people of the island. It came suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, and struck down its victims right and left, without respect either for quality or rank. The cacique families, who suffered severely, were soon in a condition of utter panic; and the native physicians, though, as I have already remarked, fairly skilled in medicine, quite lost their heads.

Ixtil appealed to me, and I willingly did all I could, and effected several cures; but I told him plainly that the trouble arose from bad sanitary conditions, and that unless the cause were removed the pest would continue. He gave me full power to do whatever I thought necessary, and I went to work with a will.

It is not necessary for me to say more about the measures I adopted than that they brought me into conflict with Cochitemi, and I had to set him completely at defiance.

In the end, these measures were effectual; but the epidemic was a great misfortune in every way: it not only diminished Ixtil's influence by carrying off some of his most devoted supporters, but led to a revival of

many obsolete superstitious practices and an outburst of fanaticism, which greatly increased the power of the priests.

Nor did the evil end here.

One day, when I called on the Cacique to present my report and discuss those of the native physicians, I perceived, before either of us spoke, that something was seriously wrong. So far, whatever he may have felt, Ixtil had borne the trouble bravely. Even the death of his dearest friends had neither disturbed the repose of his manner nor ruffled the serenity of his temper. But now his face was hard set, and his look that of a man who has received evil tidings, or is bracing himself for a struggle with some terrible misfortune.

I waited for him to speak first.

"Does Fairhair know what has come to pass?" he asked in a hollow voice. "Cotocachi" (a physician) "reports that there died last night two of the four surviving maidens who are of marriageable age this year."

"Poor girls! I am very sorry," I said, not for the moment grasping the import of the remark.

"Does not Fairhair understand?" he continued almost fiercely. "There are only two left—and one is Suma."

"Gracious Heaven! And, if the other dies——"

"Suma must be the next victim, and Ixtil—oh, Spirit of the Sun and Light of the Stars—Ixtil will have to destroy his own child!" and the Cacique, covering his face with his robe, sank with a moan into his chair.

My agitation was hardly less than his. "Suma, my

pupil, my——so bright, so intelligent! Suma to be sacrificed—killed by her own father—thrown into the volcano! Good God! it could not—should not—must not be!”

“But there is another maiden, Lord of Light, and so long as she lives the lot cannot fall on Suma.”

“True! Yet think you she will live? Even if the fever spares her, Cochitemi will not.”

“But cannot she be watched, protected, guarded, until—until——”

“Napo, the father of Cara, is the high-priest's friend. His house is always open to Cochitemi. You will see. And look there!” pointing to the volcano, which was throwing up a cloud of black smoke. “If that goes on there will be danger—danger for all. The people are in a humour to do anything the priests bid them, and the priests will demand sacrifice—the last was so efficacious. And no wonder, when even Ixtil himself thought that the maiden tribute might perchance have propitiated the demons. Fairhair was right, and Ixtil thought foolishness.”

“But hearken, Fairhair,” laying his hand on my shoulder, “the Lord of Light swears by the head of his father, by the Spirit of the Stars, and by the sacred emblems imprinted on his brow, that, come what may—whether Napo's daughter lives or dies—Suma shall not be sacrificed. Better let the mountain vomit fire and ashes, better let the lake be dried up and this fair island perish, than commit a crime which Ixtil could not survive and the Great Spirit would never forgive!”

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

"THE plot thickens, Wildfell," I observed to my friend a few days later, as we were smoking our evening cigars under the great colonnade. "Your desire to witness a great flare-up is likely to be gratified in more senses than one, I think."

"You have news, then? Something has happened?"

"Something has happened, and something is happening."

"I know what you mean—the volcano. Yes, those fire-demons seem to be firing up to-night as if their lives depended on it. The smoke is all aglow. I guess it is pretty hot down in the stoke-hole there. But why so glum, old man? Is there anything else wrong—anything besides the volcano?"

"Napo's daughter is dead."

"Of the fever?"

"They say so; but I know better. Ixtil sent me to look at the body. She died of the same complaint as Ferdinando."

"Poor girl! I am awfully sorry. What next?"

"I don't know. But the outlook is black for us all, Wildfell, and God only knows what will be the upshot."

Melchora tells me that the priests see in these things—the epidemic, the renewal of the eruption, and, above all, the death of every noble maiden of marriageable age except Suma—proofs that the Phantoms are losing the divine favour, that they have committed some grievous sin, and that, unless the cause of it be removed and atonement made, some awful calamity will happen. They are going to make a strong representation in this sense to Ixtil, and to-morrow he will be told what is expected of him.”

“And suppose he tells those meddling priests to go to the deuce; what then? I would if I were in his place.”

“You would do wrong. The priests are stronger than the Cacique just now, and he will have to swim with the stream, or risk being deposed and, perhaps, murdered.”

“What will he do, then?”

“Temporise. At any rate, I should think so. More I cannot tell you. What he does depends on what the priests demand.”

“When will this representation you speak of be made?”

“To-morrow morning.”

“When will you know the result?”

“To-morrow afternoon, when I make my accustomed visit.”

“I should like to know what passes. It may affect us, may it not?”

"Rather! Melchora may have news in the morning, and in that case I shall get to know sooner."

"Do you know, doctor, I have a foreboding that something curious is going to happen."

"So have I; more curious than pleasant, I fear."

"And I don't feel a bit like catching fish to-morrow, so I shall just loaf about here instead, and see what turns up."

After this we both turned in, but, so far as I was concerned, not to sleep. The foreboding which I shared with Wildfell kept me awake all night long. Ixtil's weakness was our danger and our enemies' opportunity. I had incurred Cochitemi's enmity, and he might be trusted not to let slip the chance of feeding fat the grudge he bore me. What shape would his vengeance take?

And poor Suma! Despite her father's oath and his evident sincerity, I did not see how he could save her. If the eruption continued, and the sacrifice should not be made, the Phantoms would revolt to a man; even his own guards would turn against him. And yet——

Poor Suma! The thought of her being led like a lamb to the slaughter—the ghastly shroud—the fatal cloth—the weird procession—the midnight sail—the flaming crater—fired my brain and rendered rest impossible. I got up, walked about until dawn, then went down to the lake and refreshed myself with a long swim.

I returned to my quarters feeling very much better; my spirits rose with the sun, and when Wildfell and I

talked things over at breakfast, I took a decidedly more hopeful view of them than I had done the night before.

"Ixtil is a strong man," I said; "and though recent events have rather impaired his authority and increased the influence of the priests, he is still the Lord of Light, the descendant of a long line of princes; the Phantoms hold him and his family in high honour; they are a gentle people, and it would take a good deal to make them rebel, or side with the priests against their prince."

"I guess you are about right, Carlyon; only when people get real scared they often lose their heads; and what with the fever and the volcano, it almost seems as if these Phantoms were getting real scared—just in the temper to believe all the nonsense the priests tell them, and do whatever they order, without much thinking whether it is right or wrong. Did you ever see a lot of people real scared?"

"No, I don't think I did."

"I remember once in our war—— Hallo!"

"What the——?"

"Look there! What is up now?"

What, indeed? While Wildfell was talking, the mat, which served as a door, had been noiselessly drawn aside, and a dozen men of the Cacique's guard, fully armed, and headed by Coxoh, were filing into the room.

"Coxoh! What means this?" I asked, in utter surprise. "I hope you are not a bearer of evil tidings? The Lord of Light has surely not——" and then I

stopped. I could not bring myself to express the fear which had flashed for a moment into my mind—that Ixtil had been murdered.

“Coxoh, to his heartfelt regret, is the bearer of evil tidings. But duty is duty; he must obey his master and tell the truth. The Lord of Light has decreed the arrest of Fairhair, Blueeyes, and Blackbeard, and ordered them to be removed to the vaulted chamber under the northern corridor.”

“Ixtil ordered me under arrest! Impossible; I don’t believe it,” I exclaimed, starting to my feet. “I refuse to go. Where is your authority?”

Coxoh pointed to his men, signifying thereby that the guard never performed any duty not specially ordered by the Cacique. And Coxoh—it was not in the man’s nature to act in a matter of this sort without authority. Monstrous, incredible as it might seem, Ixtil really had turned against us. The priests had triumphed indeed.

“Well, what is the trouble now?” asked Wildfell.

I told him, adding that even yet, with such incontrovertible evidence before my eyes as Coxoh and his men, I found it almost impossible to believe that Ixtil had betrayed us.

“Not much doubt about that, I fear. You have been mistaken in this man, Carlyon. He is a scallawag. Well, what will you do? Shall we have a fight for it? They are only little chaps, these Phantom soldiers. I could wring a few of their necks with ease.”

“They have long spears, though.”

“Wrest a couple of them out of their hands before they know what they are doing. We could lick the lot, you and I. I am sure we could. At any rate, we can try, and if they finish us it will be better than being cooked in the crater.”

“No! To do so would be throwing away a chance, and I think I see a gleam of hope. If Ixtil were really angry—if he meant mischief—he would not have sent Coxoh, a friend, to arrest us, and we should be dealt with in a much less ceremonious style. There is more in this than meets the eye. Let us go quietly to prison, my friend, and trust in Providence.”

“As you please, old man. But I should like to spit a few of these small chaps on their own toasting forks. That’s a fact.”

I told Coxoh that we were ready to follow him, whereupon he led the way to the vaulted chamber, which was in a part of the palace I had never visited before. But though underground it was well-lighted, and by no means a bad place for a prison. It closed with a huge flag, turning on a pivot—the first door, if door it could be called, I had seen in Phantomland—and Coxoh told us that a guard would be stationed outside, night and day; that we should be regularly supplied with whatever food we wanted, that we might smoke at discretion, and otherwise make ourselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

An hour later he returned with Gomez, who, at the

time of our arrest, was outside. Though much surprised the Spaniard was not depressed. He leaned his shoulder against the wall, which was composed of great panel-like slabs, crossed one leg over the other, played his banjo and sang (when he was not smoking) with as much seeming enjoyment as if he had been serenading a *señorita* in his native Sevilla.

As for Wildfell and myself, we passed the day in pacing about (the vaulted chamber being fortunately both cool and spacious), sometimes moodily smoking, at others discussing our prospects and position (without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion as to either), until night came, when, weary and worn out with fatigue and excitement, we turned into our hammocks, "all standing," as sailors say—without undressing.

"I wonder if things will look any better for us to-morrow?" said Wildfell, sadly. "When I think of my mother and Grace it gives me a kind of shiver! I was catching fish yesterday, and now I am caught myself."

"Let the morrow take thought for itself, old man. We shall feel all the better for a long sleep. At any rate, I shall. I did not close my eyes last night, and now I can hardly keep them open."

Whether Wildfell answered I have no idea, for I went off at once into a sound sleep, and remembered nothing more until—as it seemed—several hours later, when I was wakened by a light touch on my shoulder.

“Fairhair!” said a soft voice.

“Yes—what—Wildfell—is it time to get——”

“Hush, Fairhair! Not so loud!” and a soft hand was laid on my lips.

Now thoroughly aroused I looked round, and saw, in the light of the struggling moonbeams, a white phantom-like figure close by my hammock.

“Who are you?” I asked. “And what——”

“Knows not Fairhair his pupil?”

“Can it be Suma? It is surely her voice.”

“And herself. The Lord of Light wants to see Fairhair. Come!”

I slipped out of my hammock at once, and followed the girl in a state of considerable wonderment; the more especially as she took me in a direction quite opposite to the entrance. But when we got quite close to the wall I saw that one of the slabs, which I had thought quite solid, was ajar. Like the door, it swung on a pivot, and led into a passage, which we entered.

After the slab had been pushed back we were in pitchy darkness. Suma gave me her hand.

“Fairhair knows not the way,” she said. “Suma does. Come!”

And we went swiftly through long narrow passages, built, as I conceived, within the walls, and up many steps, until we reached a hanging mat, under which gleamed a light. Pushing this aside we found ourselves in the presence of Ixtil, the Lady of Light, and Zoe.

“Can Fairhair forgive this seeming unkindness?”

said the Cacique, coming forward and taking my hand. "It is seeming only. Ixtil is as much Fairhair's friend as ever."

"I am sure that whatever Ixtil has ordered must be for the best. I and my friends are willing to conform to his wishes in every respect, and we place ourselves entirely at his disposal."

"Thanks, good Fairhair. Ixtil has sent for him that he may explain the things that have come to pass, and lay before him the plan of action which he has woven in his brain."

"Listen!" (leading me away from the ladies). "There came this morning to the Hall of Audience all the priests of the four temples, and half the chiefs of the lordly families. Their bearing was very humble, and their protestations of loyalty very loud, which betokened, thought Ixtil, that they were going to make large demands—and he was right. The Land of Light had suffered much from the pest, they said, and the condition of the smoking mountain grows every day more threatening. The fire-demons ask for another victim, and, unless they are propitiated, great calamities will occur. Then their spokesman pointed out that these troubles have occurred only since the coming of the strangers, whom the Lord of Light has so much befriended; and the priests, having consulted the stars (which always say what they desire) and studied the words of Mediotaque Cuixlahuaecan (which they always interpret to suit their own views), declare that the sole

means whereby the favour of the Sun God can be regained and the wrath of the fire-demons assuaged, is to put the strangers to death and pay the maiden tribute in anticipation and at once, lest worse should befall."

"Lest worse should befall!" I exclaimed.

"There spoke the high-priest. Suma is the only eligible maiden left alive. If she were to die—or disappear—the rite could not be performed, and then the world would be at an end."

"This is Cochitemi's revenge."

"And a very fine revenge! If he could have the strangers put to death, and force Ixtil to sacrifice Suma to the fire-demons, his triumph would be complete. But it must not be, and, if Fairhair will give his help, this priestly plotter shall be utterly defeated and his schemes set at naught."

"Has Fairhair not said that he is entirely at Ixtil's disposal? He has only to say the word and Fairhair will obey. What said the Lord of Light in answer to these demands?"

"If Ixtil could have done as he desired he would have put the high-priest into bonds, and dropped over his face the cloth of death. But a ruler is only one, his people are many. There are times when he has to yield, like the palm-tree which bends for a moment before the blast, and to meet force with guile. Ixtil knew that resistance might be fatal to his authority, possibly to his life; he knew, too, that it is wise to yield with a good grace. So, after listening patiently

to the foolish words of the priests and their dupes, he complimented them on their wisdom and piety, admitted that he had made a mistake in harbouring these strangers, and said that he should order them straightway into custody—to be dealt with as hereafter might be determined. As for the propitiatory rite, he observed that, however painful it might be to his fatherly feelings to immolate his own daughter, he would allow neither self-interest nor affection to stand in the way of duty. Better that one should die, however precious, than that all should suffer.

“Cochitemi asked when the sacrifice should take place?

“Ixtil answered half a moon hence, unless in the meanwhile the fire-demons should cease from troubling. Then the high-priest observed that Fairhair was a great magician, and that if he were not closely watched he would either get away or work some terrible mischief; and he recommended that he should be put to death at once. To which Ixtil replied that a thing of such grave import must be done with due deliberation, that the vaulted chamber would be watched by a detachment of the royal guard, and if Cochitemi liked, for further security, to station a few of his priests about the entrance he was at liberty to do so.”

“In saying this Ixtil was deceiving Cochitemi?” I said.

“The Lord of Light was opposing force with guile. The high-priest thinks himself wise and strong. When he pits himself against his prince he is like a child who fancies himself a man.”

“No doubt. But as yet, owing probably to the dulness of his wit, Fairhair does not see in what way the Lord of Light is going to get the better of the high-priest. He has promised to put the strangers to death and sacrifice Suma——”

“Ah, but he does not intend to perform. Listen, Fairhair! He and his friends must go, and Suma must go with them.”

“Suma go with us? Impossible!”

If Ixtil had told me to rig up my balloon and fly with him and all his family to Saturn, I could not have been more surprised. Take that soft-skinned, delicately-nurtured young girl through the interminable forests and over the precipitous mountains which hemmed us in on every side, expose her to hardships that hardly the strongest could hope to survive—and in company with four men! The Cacique was surely either gone mad, or I had mistaken his character and he was a fool.

“Why, impossible? Fairhair is thinking of the difficulties of the journey, and that it is not seemly for a maiden to travel alone with four men not of her family.”

“The Lord of Light has divined Fairhair’s thoughts.”

“The journey will neither be long nor hard. There is a short and easy way, of which none save Ixtil and Morotoco, the chief huntsman, know the secret; and when Suma leaves her father she will be Fairhair’s wife.”

What next?

Mad, and no mistake ! Suma my wife. The idea was absurd, preposterous, impossible—yet, somehow or other, not altogether displeasing. Suma was attractive, intelligent, and comely, and, there was no denying it, I liked the girl. In other circumstances perhaps——

“Fairhair hesitates. Perhaps he is displeased with Ixtil’s proposal, or desires not to become Suma’s husband. But he must know that in no other way can the maiden’s life be saved and the Lord of Light enabled to abolish the custom of human sacrifice. For in the absence of an acceptable victim the rite cannot be performed, and once omitted it will never be resumed.”

“Ixtil’s wish is Fairhair’s law. But Suma—is she willing to leave father and mother, country and friends, to dwell in a distant land with a strange people ?”

“Suma is an obedient daughter, and will do as she is bid. But her heart has gone out to her teacher, and she will make him a loving wife. Let Fairhair ask the maiden himself. The Great Spirit knows how dear is the girl to her father and mother, and how terrible will be their grief when she is gone. But better so than that she should be thrown to the fire-demons. And they know that Fairhair will cherish the child as the apple of his eye ; and, in the time to come, her love for her husband will be greater than her sorrow for her kindred in the Land of Light.”

Without waiting for a reply the Cacique went to the other end of the room, where his wife and daughter

were sitting near a table, on which lay a map of the Land of Light and a part of the territory of the wild Indians.

And then he told me the secret of the short way and explained the route we should have to take.

Westward of the volcano the lake empties itself into a broad swift stream, known as the Silent River, which, after running three days' journey in a southerly direction, strikes the base of a line of lofty mountains, and then turns abruptly northward. These mountains are unbroken by a single pass, and too precipitous to be climbed—no human foot has ever trod their rugged and inaccessible summits—but within an hour's walk from the Silent River the barrier is pierced by an underground passage, a natural tunnel, whose southern exit is within a short distance of a Guatemalan village.

The existence of this passage had, however, until it was revealed to me, been known only to two persons—the reigning Cacique and his chief huntsman.

“And Ixtil must ask Fairhair and his comrades,” said the Cacique, “to swear by the God they worship and all else they hold sacred to keep secret the locality of the passage and the position of the Land of Light. Our safety and our happiness, the very existence of our ancient race, depend on our isolation. Once let neighbouring peoples obtain access to the valley, either as friends or foes, and our fate will be that of our Toltec ancestors and their Aztec conquerors. What says Fairhair? Will he do this?”

“With all his heart. So also will Blueeyes, Blackbeard, and Pedro.”

“Pedro is a Christianised Indian. He cannot be trusted. He must stay here. Never fear, he shall suffer no harm. Suma will now lead Fairhair back to the vaulted chamber. To-morrow night we shall meet again. Meanwhile, not a word of this to the others.”

Again Suma placed her soft velvety hand in mine, and we threaded together the dark passages which led to the vaulted chamber. As we were about to part I asked her if she knew what her father had proposed.

“Suma knows,” was the answer.

“And is she willing to leave the Land of Light, and all she holds dear, and go with Fairhair, she knows not whither, never to return?”

“What her father thinks best for her family and people that would Suma do, though it should break her heart. But she knows that Fairhair will be kind to Ixtil’s daughter, and it is better to be his wife than Cochitemi’s victim.”

“Suma has a noble nature,” I said, “and Fairhair will do his utmost to make her happy and render himself worthy of her love.”

And then I kissed her hand and let her go, and, slipping quietly into the vaulted chamber, regained my hammock without wakening my companions.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IXTIL'S SCHEME AND COCHITEMI'S FALL.

At our next interview (the night after) Ixtil unfolded his scheme, and we came to an agreement as to how it should be carried out.

Suma was to feign illness, on which her mother, protesting that I was the only doctor in whom she had confidence, would have me brought up to her room under escort, when the Cacique would inform me that if I succeeded in curing his daughter my life might possibly be spared; and as her death was the very last thing the priests desired, this proceeding could not fail to meet with general approval. But instead of curing her I was to put her to sleep with *carupa*, diluted in such a way as to render it innocuous, and then declare her dead. On this (burials in Phantomland taking place immediately after decease) the body would be straightway laid (as is usual in such cases) in a wickerwork coffin, preparatory to its being conveyed to the royal mausoleum within the precincts of the Temple of the Sun. But before this could be done Ixtil would secretly take Suma away and replace her with a lay figure, which would be duly laid in the ground instead of the supposed corpse.

As soon after the funeral as possible Suma and I were to be married—by the Cacique himself (who, as

Chief of the State, had power to tie and untie the matrimonial knot), assisted by Melchora the scribe, whom Ixtil could trust as implicitly as Moco-roto, the huntsman.

Immediately after the ceremony, Suma (attired as a boy), Wildfell, Gomez, and myself, were to go down to a little cove not far from the palace, where we should find Moco-roto waiting for us with his boat. If we had a fair wind we might easily reach the Silent River before sunrise. If not, we could all row, the boat being large. Moco-roto would show us the entrance to the tunnel, and once on the other side of the mountains we should have no difficulty, the Indians of that part of the country being tame, and ready to do anything for gold.

"But you must not go away empty-handed," said Ixtil. "Here gold is a superfluity, yonder it is a necessity. The Lady of Light and her daughters will fill the folds of your tunics with gold discs, and you may take with you as many more as you care to carry. And perhaps these green pebbles may be of use. The wild men find them somewhere on the mountains."

The "green pebbles" were a heap of uncut emeralds. "These are very precious, Ixtil. In Europe they are worth much more than their weight in gold."

"Let them be Suma's marriage-gift then. And they are not all. She shall have as many more."

"Suma will be rich."

"Better so. She will not know want, and it would not be fitting for a prince's daughter to be a portionless bride."

After some further conversation, I returned to my prison, accompanied, as before, by Suma, and, as before, I got back to my hammock without attracting the attention of either Wildfell or Gomez.

In the morning, however, I told them everything. At first Wildfell refused to believe me. He would have it that I had been dreaming, and remained obdurate in his scepticism until I showed him the secret entrance, and walked with him a little way up the passage into which it opened.

"Well," he exclaimed, convinced at last, "if this does not beat cockfighting! And you are really engaged to an Indian princess, a Phantom Pocohontas, with pockets full of emeralds, and I am going home to Grace and my mother with as much gold as I can carry (I can carry a thundering lot, Carlyon). How beautifully it will reconcile them to my long absence. No reproaches, you bet. If I could only wire a full account of our adventures to the *New York Herald*, winding up with a glowing description of the wedding, the wild beauty of the bride and the dashing appearance of the bridegroom, it would be worth a small fortune. They would give dollars for it, my friend."

"Very likely. But whatever happens, Wildfell, don't let anything of this get into the papers. And our adventures are not over yet. Much has to be done before we get away, and there is many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know."

"That is true. All the same, we are bound to get

away this time, and I feel sure we shall. Are we to have the honour—Gomez and I—of seeing you turned off.”

“Certainly ; and at the first British Consulate we come to we will have it done over again.”

“By way of making assurance doubly sure, I suppose ?”

“Exactly.”

“Right for you. When does it come off—marriage number one, I mean ?”

“In four or five days.”

“When does Miss Suma’s fatal illness begin ?”

“This morning. I daresay it has begun already. I expect to be sent for before the day is over.”

In this expectation I was not disappointed. A few hours later the big flag swung round on its pivot, and Coxoh, followed by his guardsmen, entered the vaulted chamber.

After respectfully saluting me, he said that the Lady Suma had been taken seriously ill, and the Lord of Light required my presence in the royal apartments.

To this order I of course rendered due obedience, and, accompanied by my escort, went forthwith to the part of the palace inhabited by Ixtil and his family. Suma was lying on a couch apparently very ill—she acted the part of *malade imaginaire* to admiration—and her mother and sister were in great distress. After making the usual inquiries, and observing that the case, though grave, was by no means hopeless, I asked leave to go to my own room in order to prepare a potion.

At this point, Ixtil, followed by the high-priest and two other personages, appeared on the scene. Without returning my greeting, he told me sternly that I had been accused of witchcraft, and merited death; but that if I succeeded in curing the Lady Suma my life might possibly be spared.

I answered quietly that I would do my best, and had little doubt that the Lady Suma would speedily recover. I moreover asked that if the potion I was about to prepare did not produce the desired effect, I might be sent for again as soon as possible.

In the result I was sent for before sunset, for the medicine, as I meant it to do (though essentially harmless), had made Suma feel sickly, and look as if she were really very ill.

I expressed great concern, and her mother and I watched by her bedside far into the night. Towards morning Suma to all appearance passed quietly away; and so deathlike did she seem that I had some difficulty in persuading the Lady of Light that her daughter still lived. But as I had prepared the *carupa* with great care, diluting it largely with alcohol, I felt sure that the unconsciousness would not last more than a few hours. (I need hardly say that I had informed nobody, save Ixtil, of the anæsthetic, as distinguished from the toxic, properties of the drug.)

When I formally pronounced life to be extinct, in the presence of the Lady of Light and her attendants, all broke out into loud lamentations, and Ixtil, hearing

the outcry, appeared on the scene in a state of well-assumed sorrow and excitement; and with many reproaches for my incompetence, and threats of vengeance for my failure, ordered me back to the vaulted chamber.

A little later (as I afterwards heard) came Cochitemi, with several officers of state, to view the body. The high-priest, who was in a mighty rage at being robbed of his victim, said I had killed the maiden by my magical arts in revenge for my incarceration, and proposed that I should be cast alive to the fire-demons forthwith.

Ixtil answered sternly that justice should be done, and then Suma was folded in a shroud, and in the sight of all placed in a basket-work coffin, where, I need hardly say, she could easily breathe.

The burial was to take place at midnight, and during the day Ixtil and his wife secretly conveyed Suma to another room, and put in the coffin a dummy of about the same weight as the supposed corpse.

The dummy was buried with much ceremony, and twenty-four hours afterwards Suma had fully recovered from the effects of the potion and the *carupa*.

There was now nothing to prevent our departure; and as Cochitemi and the priests were clamouring for my immediate execution, Ixtil thought we had better leave at once, and fixed the marriage for the fourth evening after the funeral.

In the meantime every preparation, possible in the circumstances, was made. Most of our effects

were taken down to the boat, and, at my suggestion, a tent, which would also serve as an awning, was put on board for my wife's special use. It was impossible to keep all this absolutely secret, and I greatly feared that Cochitemi, who was as cunning as a serpent and as watchful as a cat, might get wind of what was going on, and then—as I said to Wildfell—"there would be the deuce to pay."

However, all went on well. At the time appointed we left the vaulted chamber by the secret door, and gained the room to which Suma had previously conducted me, safely and unobserved.

Everything was in readiness. Ixtil, the Lady of Light, Zoe, Melchora—all were there. Suma—albeit sorrowful, as well she might be, looked very charming in her male attire, and in the loving confidence with which she came forward and, placing her hands in mine, looked up into my eyes, there was something unspeakably pathetic. It touched me to the heart.

After we had put on our gold-quilted tunics, and sworn to reveal neither the whereabouts of the Land of Light nor of the passage through the mountains, the marriage ceremony was performed, and the record of it, written in hieroglyphics by Melchora the scribe, handed to Suma.

Then came the hardest part of all—the parting. The poor mother seemed as if she *could* not let her child go. Zoe wept bitterly. Ixtil, his eyes brimming with tears, took both my hands between his and, unable

to command his voice, looked with his expressive eyes all he would have said, and bade me a mute farewell.

For a few minutes we all kept silent. Then the Cacique, by a strong effort, mastered his emotion.

"This must cease, and they must depart," he said ; "time is going on, and there is danger in delay."

He had hardly spoken, when, as if to confirm his words, the curtain in the doorway was drawn aside, and Cochitemi, followed by four other men, armed, and in civilian costume, appeared at the threshold.

"Ah !" exclaimed the high-priest, half, as it seemed, in surprise, half in exultation. "Fairhair, the wizard, and the Lady Suma—alive ! We have been tricked. But the Sun God and the fire-demons will punish this vile fraud."

And then, turning away, he made as if he would go.

"Seize them ! stop them ! Fairhair, Blueeyes, stop them ! If they get away we are lost," shouted the Cacique.

The next moment I had two of them by the throat. Gomez collared the third, and Wildfell caught Cochitemi by his robe and pulled him back into the room.

My fellows, after a short struggle, in which they got a good deal the worst of it, surrendered at discretion. Gomez mastered the other with ease ; but the high-priest, who, though short, was very powerful, fought like a wild cat, and Wildfell had to give him a crushing blow with his fist before he would be quiet.

"What shall I do with him ?" he asked of Ixtil.

“Throw him out of the casement!”

Nothing loath, and despite his struggles, the American lifted Cochitemi from the floor, and, carrying him to the window, thrust aside the curtain, and threw him out headlong.

“There, Catchimalivo! You will give no more trouble,” said Wildfell, grimly. “A hundred feet, if it’s a yard.”

“He deserved his fate. Cochitemi brought these men here to murder the Lord of Light. Ixtil knows them; they are all priests, and, as you see, armed. They expected to find me alone.”

And then he made the trembling wretches confess that they had been put on to murder the Lord of Light by the high-priest, who suspected that Ixtil was planning the escape of the strangers.

“How shall we dispose of them?” I asked.

“Bind them. They shall die the death, but not yet.”

We bound them hand and foot with their own belts.

“And now,” said the Cacique, “the sooner you are gone the better. It was well you were here. It is well this has happened. Ixtil will now be master in his own house; but it must not be known that Suma still lives. No more leave-taking. Go! Take with you Ixtil’s blessing and his heartfelt thanks for saving his life and helping him to redeem his land from the curse of human sacrifice. May the Sun God and the Spirit of the Stars light you on your homeward way and to the end of the great journey of life.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SILENT RIVER AND THE SECRET PASSAGE.

My tale is nearly told.

At sunrise on the following morning we entered the Silent River. Suma, after bowing, in mute adoration, before the orb of day, looked with beaming eyes towards the Smoking Mountain, round whose rugged summit was wreathed a silvery cloud.

"A sign of peace for the Land of Light!" she exclaimed. "The fire-demons have ceased from troubling. Ixtil will point to yon sun-blessed cloud and tell his people that the tribute demanded by the demons was not a maiden's life, but the death of a wicked priest, who personified the degrading superstition which my Fairhair's devotion has helped to destroy."

"Say rather my Suma's self-sacrifice."

"True," she said sadly; "it is a great sacrifice to give up father and mother, kinsfolk, and country. But," brightly, "more than all these is Fairhair's love, and Suma is content."

On the third day after leaving the Phantom City we reached the mountain barrier, and were led by Mocaroto to the mouth of the underground passage. It was so hidden by vegetation that, without a guide, not the

most minute directions would have enabled us to find it. Here we parted company with the huntsman, and, lighting torches and shouldering our packs, plunged literally into the heart of the mountain.

The geological formation was jurassic limestone, and the tunnel had evidently, in some remote age, been the channel of a river. One end being considerably higher than the other, the interior was well drained, and free from water; while the difference in elevation produced a continual current of air, which acted as a natural ventilator.

After a tramp of three hours we came out in a thicket, through which we had to cut a way with our *machetes*; but a short walk brought us to an open savanna, where we found a hamlet inhabited by a few half-breeds and Christianised Indians. They were fortunately not very curious. We said that we had come from the east, and been compelled to leave our horses behind owing to the badness of the road. With this explanation they seemed quite satisfied, and we had no difficulty in obtaining food and shelter.

On the following day we bought half-a-dozen horses and mules, engaged *arrieros*, and started for the coast.

It was a long and rather arduous journey to San José de Guatemala; but we got there at last, and sailed thence by steamer to Panama. At Colon we parted, much to our regret, with our fellow-travellers. Wildfell, of course, went to the States; Gomez to Spain,

where he hoped, with the help of the gold given him by Ixtil, to make his fortune as a showman.

On the day of our arrival at Colon I cabled to Dominick's bankers in London; and, learning that my friend was still in Europe, I decided to proceed thither at once, and engaged berths by the first Royal Mail steamer bound for Southampton; which we reached in due course, and were met by Dominick, fully restored to health, and eager for an account of my adventures.

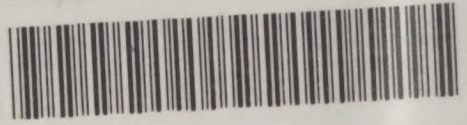
Where we are now it is not necessary to say. Yet the kind reader who has accompanied me thus far may be pleased to know that the idea of revisiting the Land of Light has more than once crossed my mind. But I have given hostages to fortune; the journey is long and not free from danger, and I am by no means sure that I should be able to find the underground passage. It is quite possible, moreover, that a Pharaoh may have arisen who knows not Joseph, and that I might not be allowed to return. For these reasons, and, above all, because my dear Suma, who has ties which keep her at home, says I must wander no more, I have decided to leave the further exploration of Central America to travellers who are as free from responsibilities as I was when I undertook the discovery of the Phantom City.

THE END.





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